

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What additional details does Mark furnish to fill out the picture of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem?
2. In what peculiar manner did Jesus handle the disciples, preparing them to hear this prediction of His approaching suffering? Why would this particular treatment have been necessary at that moment?
3. What, in Jesus' words, is indicated about the time-period in which He was then speaking?
4. What are the details of His suffering that Jesus makes explicit now, details which before had been absent or only implied?
5. Show how Jesus' predictions harmonize with the Old Testament prophecies about His death, and how they differ. Cite some OT prophecies that predict His suffering.
6. What does the minuteness and accuracy of His predictions prove about His claims to be God's Son?
7. While Matthew and Mark do not report the disciples' inability to accept or understand Jesus' plain prediction, as does Luke, how do they prove that they do know about the disciples' failure to grasp it?
8. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

## Section 52

## JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH HIERARCHY

(Parallel: Mark 10:35-45)

TEXT: 20:20-28

20 Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee with her sons, worshipping *him*, and asking a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wouldest thou? She saith unto him, Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom. 22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? They say unto him, We are able. 23 He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink: but to sit on my right hand, and on *my* left hand, is not mine to give; but *it is for them* for whom

it hath been prepared of my Father, 24 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. 25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: 28 even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose James and John, two of Jesus' closest intimates, would stoop to make this request so obviously selfish in its exclusion of others?
- b. Why did they use their mother to promote their own purposes? Or do you believe that she herself pushed the question and the two brothers merely went along with it?
- c. Why would they make this request rather than some other request?
- d. On what basis do you suppose they replied so confidently: "We are able to drink your cup and be baptized with your baptism"?
- e. Why could Jesus not grant their request? For whom are such honors destined? That is, to whom do you think God has already prepared the chief places?
- f. How does the indignation of the remaining ten Apostles prove that they shared the very same spirit and understanding of the two brothers against which they were indignant?
- g. Why did Jesus select the standard of humble service as the measure by which He judges greatness in the Kingdom?
- h. How does Jesus' teaching in this section address itself to the problem of hierarchy or power structures in the Kingdom of God?
- i. Why mention His own death at precisely this time, right in the middle of His rebuke of the Apostles' greedy ambitions?
- j. Why would Jesus have to die? How does His suffering for others prove His point about true greatness?
- k. How is humble service and suffering for others the only path to true greatness and real power over others?
- l. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

At that time the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons, approached Jesus, with her sons. Bowing low before Him, she requested a favor of Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we request."

But He responded, "What do you wish me to do for you?"

She answered, "Promise to grant that, when you sit in state as King, these two sons of mine may sit with you, one at your right, the other at your left."

But Jesus answered them, "You do not realize what you are asking for! Can you drink from the cup of sorrow that I am about to drink or pass through the waters of suffering I am passing through?"

"We can," they answered.

Then Jesus observed prophetically, "You shall indeed share the cup from which I must drink and you will truly be immersed in suffering as will I. But the seating arrangements according to relative positions of honor is not something I can decide capriciously on my own. I must dispense them only to those for whom my Father has planned such honors."

The request aroused the indignation of the other ten disciples against the two brothers, James and John. So Jesus gathered them all around Him and began, "You all know that the people who are considered rulers over the pagans dominate them with despotic harshness, and their superiors make them feel the weight of their authority. However, it must be different among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be servant of all the others. If someone wants to be at the top in first position, he must be everyone's slave, just like the Son of man is. In fact, He is not here to be served by others, but to serve everyone else, and to surrender His life as the price of freedom for many.

## SUMMARY

James and John, in complicity with their mother, requested the highest posts of honor in the Kingdom, Jesus disapproved the request for its ignorance of the real issues, the suffering involved, but tested the two whether they could qualify. Although they responded with optimism and confidence, He prophesied their share in His sufferings. However, He must deny any right to dispense honors to favorites,

since the rule of God decided those to whom such would eventually and rightly go.

The other ten Apostles became angry at the conniving of James and John, making it necessary for Jesus to bring this problem to a head and solve it. This He did by forever damning political power structures as a means of ego-feeding in the Kingdom of God. Greatness and importance to God in the Kingdom is determined exclusively on the basis of unselfish, self-giving service to others. Jesus' own example—even to the point of laying down His life for others—is the standard.

## NOTES

### II. THE DISCIPLES AND THE QUESTION OF POWER STRUCTURES IN THE KINGDOM: JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH A HIERARCHY OF POWER (20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45)

#### A. JESUS' AUNT SALOME AMBITIOUSLY SEEKS ARBITRARY FAVORITISM FOR HER SONS

20:20 **Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee.** An alternate newspaper headline for this title story might have been: "JESUS REFUSES TO INDULGE IN NEPOTISM." Zebedee's wife might be Jesus' own Aunt Salome. (See notes on 10:2; 13:54, 58; 27:56 and the special study: "The Brethren of the Lord" after 13:54-58, esp. Chart 5) If so, her position as kinswoman would have weight that her sons were probably counting on. In this case, her sons, James and John, would naturally be His cousins. (Mk. 10:35)

The unusual expression, *the mother of the sons of Zebedee* (here and in 27:56), instead of "the mother of James and John" or "the wife of Zebedee," has led to the hypothesis that, shortly after the call of his two sons (Mt. 4:21f), the father, Zebedee, died. Is it possible that James or John was the disciple who sought permission to go bury his father? (Mt. 8:21) This will never be known. However, Mark (10:35) describes the brothers as "sons of Zebedee." Does this contradict the foregoing theories, or merely identify the two men by their well-known patronymic, whereas their father is not thereby proven to be dead or alive?

(Cf. Mt. 4:21; 10:2; 26:37; Mk. 1:19; 3:17; Lk. 5:10; Jn. 21:2)

How should we harmonize Matthew's assertion that *the mother* approached Jesus with this request, with Mark's notice that the sons themselves asked the question? By the principle that what a man commissions another to do for him may be said to have been done by himself. In fact, the entire account proceeds as if only the sons had made the request (cf. 20:24), since everyone—Jesus and the other Ten—holds the two brothers as personally responsible for their unwarranted social climbing. In fact, once her request is stated, Jesus dealt directly with the sons themselves as if she were not even present.

**Asking a certain thing of him** sounds like a blank check request, and Mark confirms this suspicion by furnishing their actual words: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Were they hoping to play upon His sympathy and good will, pushing Him into an unretractable blanket promise in their favor? At any rate, their deviousness is betrayed by their embarrassment about asking Him outright and by their felt need to use an intermediary to request what, if asked frankly and openly, their conscience knew they had no right to, and could not but arouse the jealousy of others. (Cf. 1 Kg. 2:19f)

Whether she is Jesus' aunt or not, she is certainly not unaware that her own sons are at the very heart of the larger nucleus of intimate disciples most likely to be appointed to positions of importance. It is not unlikely that the two brothers let their mother's ambitions take the risks of censure by others. Had she learned about the underground power struggle going on among the Apostles? (Cf. on Mt. 18:1) Rather than repudiate it, she joined it to press for an advantage for her boys! And they stand complacently by, making no protest, perhaps even pleased to have her advance their interests.

20:21 **And he said unto her, What wouldest thou?** He is not deceived either by His own love for them or by their fawning for His favors. He correctly requires that they commit themselves before He will commit Himself to sign any blank checks. Had Herod Antipas done this with His Salome, his outcome might have been different. (See notes on 14:7ff.)

**Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom.** Although these two disciples had been told of the absolutely essential humility required for honor in the Kingdom (18:1-35), nevertheless, Jesus had indeed

intimated that the Twelve would be honored over the rest of the twelve tribes of Israel by their being seated on thrones to judge them. (19:28) Consequently, James and John perhaps envisioned a throne-room with Jesus enthroned at the center of the back wall, with the Twelve seated on lesser thrones, half on His right, half on His left, arranged in a semicircle around the room. If so, those enthroned closer to Him would be presumed as worthy of greater honor than those seated farther to the left or right. (Cf. *Ant.*, VI, II, 9; 1 Sa. 20:25; 1 Kg. 2:19; Psa. 110:1) Those seated on His immediate left or right would be most honored as greatest. If this is their idea, their sin lies in boldly and stubbornly requesting the best of the seats for themselves alone, a request that necessarily excluded any consideration of the other, perhaps equally worthy, Apostles. Were they using this method to cut out Peter? Because of what Jesus had already committed to him, he would be a formidable rival. If James and John foresaw the indignant reaction of the others and yet plowed ahead, their heartless selfishness is the more inexcusable. The extent to which they did not foresee it only measures how much they were totally absorbed in their own self-centered planning. Bruce (*Training*, 274) eases our shock at the conduct of these intimate friends of the Lord, by noticing that

These were the two disciples who made themselves so prominent in resenting the rudeness of the Samaritan villagers. The greatest zealots among the twelve were thus also the most ambitious, a circumstance that will not surprise the student of human nature. On the former occasion they asked fire from heaven to consume their adversaries; on the present occasion they ask a favour from Heaven to the disadvantage of their friends. The two requests are not so very dissimilar.

They are asking to be the Messiah's most exalted, most influential counsellors.

The terrible incongruity between His predictions of death at Jerusalem (20:17-19) and this expectation of glory, both of which were known to James and John, is explicable only if we see the intensity of their unwavering confidence that the outcome of His suffering ("whatever THAT is supposed to mean!") must include a glorious Kingdom. Undoubtedly they judged His passion predictions as mere, unjustified pessimism, the result of fatigue and pressure of endless campaigning. Consequently, they express their confidence in His final victory by seeking those positions which could only come about

because of that triumph. Is this an attempt to cheer Him up and push His gloomy talk of crosses into the background? This, sadly, measures how fervently they disbelieved His prophetic passion predictions. So, *in thy kingdom* means "in your glory." (Mk. 10:37) Whatever else may be criticized about their request, it must be conceded that the plea is based on the unshaken certainty (= faith) that, despite the many stormclouds on the horizon, He and the Twelve would be enthroned in His Kingdom. (19:28) Further, the urgency that stirs her to present her request now on the way up to Jerusalem, points to her assumption (not unshared by many others, see Lk. 19:11) that, upon arrival in the capital, Jesus intended to establish His glorious government and announce His cabinet and begin His reign.

The perverse incongruity of this scheming for power by these crude Christians, so utterly contrasting with Jesus' approaching sufferings about which He had just spoken (20:17-19), rather than confirm the judgment that it is apocryphal because of our shock at the audaciousness these disciples show, should convince us of the authenticity of the narrative that contains it. Not only do the Evangelists bare the disciples' sordid presumption, but, in that act, convince the reader of the genuineness of its history. We are not in the presence of mythology created to glorify Christians heroes, but in the presence of an ugly fact too true to human nature to be denied. These disciples were yet rough-hewn Christians to whom the temptation to ambition was real.

## B. JESUS PARRIES THEIR REQUEST (20:22, 23)

### 1. REBUKE: "You do not understand what you are asking for!" (20:22)

20:22 **But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask.** Their expectation that He would proclaim His Kingdom upon their arrival at Jerusalem, was a popular notion (cf. Lk. 19:11; 17:21; 9:27), not totally unfounded. What was completely misunderstood was the manner and kind of reign He intended to establish. James and John ask for these positions of honor from a King who would shortly be exalted to a cross with two thieves nailed at His right hand and at His left! **You know not what you ask.** Their wrong-headed, selfish prayer is instructive because it illustrates the principle that

prayer, to be effective, must reflect one's sense of community as well as submission to God's will. James and John's prayer must be frustrated by the Lord, if the wishes of the other ten should be recognized, and vice versa. (See note on 18:19.) Further, it totally ignored God's planning for the Kingdom. (See on 20:23c.) Theirs was an appeal He could not admit without denying His own sense of fairness and being untrue to His instructions given in the Sermon on Personal Relations. (18:1-35) Worse, the two brothers are vain in their certainty that the promotion they seek could only promote the true interests of the Kingdom of God. They anticipate no negative effects from this request, either from the other Apostles, or even later. They cannot foresee that disaster could be forecast for a Kingdom that honors men of their views. Listen again to Bruce (*Training*, 275f) sketch their position:

James and John not only thought of the kingdom that was coming as a kingdom of this world, but they thought meanly of it even under that view. For it is an unusually corrupt and unwholesome condition of matters, even in a secular state, when places of highest distinction can be obtained by solicitation and favour, and not on the sole ground of fitness for the duties of the position. When family influence or courtly arts are the pathway to power, every patriot has cause to mourn. How preposterous, then, the idea that promotion can take place in the divine, ideally-perfect kingdom by means that are inadmissible in any well-regulated secular kingdom! To cherish such an idea is in effect to degrade and dishonour the Divine King, by likening Him to an unprincipled despot, who has more favour for flatterers than for honest men; and to caricature the divine kingdom by assimilating it to the most misgoverned states on earth.

Indeed, they did NOT know what they were asking!

## 2. QUESTION: "Are you able to suffer with me?"

**Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?** Because they steadily refused to see Him as a suffering King, they cannot see that a prayer for glory beside Him must be a request for suffering. They should have imagined that, on the principle that anything worthwhile requires renunciation, greatness in the Kingdom would demand sacrifice too. But they cannot imagine that only the way



of the cross leads to the throne. In other words, the path to promotion in the Kingdom does not take the route of self-indulgent clamor for position nor that of political prizes handed out to favorites. It must pass through the bloody baptism of suffering. To *drink a cup* is to experience its contents, whether good or bad. Biblical allusions are plentiful to illustrate positive experiences (cf. Psa. 16:5; 23:5; 116:13) and negative ones (Psa. 11:6; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15f; 49:12; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:32-34; Hab. 2:16; Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 17:4; 18:6) From the point of view of the host who pours it out for others; *the cup* would mean "the portion assigned," i.e. what God pours out for the individual. (cf. Jn. 18:11) So Jesus, later would speak of His cup of suffering (Mt. 26:39, 41 = Mk. 14:36 = Lk. 22:42). Mark (10:38b) adds: "and to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Since *baptism* is nothing but an immersion, that to which He alludes here is an overwhelming suffering in which one is immersed. (Cf. Psa. 69:1f; 124:3-5; Lam. 3:54) In the case of James and John, He refers to the painful experience of martyrdom and exile in His cause. Suffering for His sake is a theme underlined many times before. (5:10-12; 10:16-39; 13:21; 16:24-27) It would become one of the main themes in Peter's first epistle. (1 Pt. 1:6f; 2:20-25; 3:13-18; 4:12-19; 5:9f) His own Passion Predictions had been so many, so precise and recently so frequent, that His suffering, theoretically, should have been no mystery to any of them. They could not have been ignorant to what *cup* or to what baptism He so often, so honestly and so realistically had made allusion. (Cf. Lk. 12:50) They had come to Him with their request for a blanket promise of honor. Now He hands them His blank check of suffering, asking them if they are willing to sign it without knowing precisely what lay in their own future.

**They say unto him, We are able.** They still do not know what they are saying! These two men have a curious mental block that permits them to picture their own suffering for His cause, that yet contemporaneously and totally blocks out every concept of His death suffered for them, even though He talks about their suffering in figurative form and discussed His own in literal language!

**We are able.** With what mixed emotions do they answer this way? THEY are signing the blank check now. They had expected honors, wealth and glory, but He handed them a mysterious, sinister cup to drink. How much of their certainty partakes of the bravado of Peter who just as confidently asserted, "Though they all fall away, I will not deny you . . . I am ready to go with you to prison and

death . . . even if I must die with you, I will not deny you"? (Cf. Mt. 26:33; Lk. 22:33; Jn. 13:37; Mt. 26:35) Is this readiness to promise anything a brave front put on to cover an unexpected turn in the conversation, a stubborn continuation of their selfish request for positions of honor, as if His brutally frank question were but part of the necessary preliminaries? No, these fiercely loyal disciples cannot be charged with insincerity here. It is rather their over-confidence that believers themselves capable in their own strength of meeting anything that might come, that is blameworthy. If they envision His cup and baptism as suffering or difficulty in connection with some great battle or struggle surrounding the inauguration of the Kingdom, these fearless Galileans answer sincerely and perfectly in the character of their people. (Cf. *Wars*, III, 3, 3) It is unfair at least to John to claim that, in Jesus' last tragic hours of His rejection, all the disciples including these two were unfaithful to Jesus, deserting Him rather than share His cup of pain. The (traditionally) youngest of them proved to be the most intrepid. John, no doubt often dreadfully scared, courageously stayed on the scene through the trials and crucifixion. Their devotion expressed here is honestly meant even if wrongly understood.

This strange mixture of character traits in these two disciples is not intended as a passing curiosity, but rather for our instruction. The thoughtful reader must ask himself what it is, in this clashing combination of the Christlike and the diabolical, that makes the case of Zebedee's sons sound so familiar. Honesty compels us to confess the same zeal for the Lord and the same selfish ambition; the same high courage and the same cruel disregard for brethren; the same readiness to suffer and the same readiness to make others suffer; the same concern for the Lord's honor and the same disregard for the disaster that must come to the Lord's work if our own ambitions were to be realized. Only this kind of honest identification of ourselves in these disciples in this moment of weakness will help us feel the need for the teaching Jesus will give us to convert our thinking to His.

### 3. PROPHECY: "You will truly suffer with me."

20:23 **He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink:** "and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." (Mk. 10:39b) With what a grave manner He must have pronounced

these words as, in the Spirit, He peered into the future to pronounce their fate. Yes, their present commitment would be fully carried out. Rather than angrily expose their short-sightedness and self-seeking devotion by giving them an impatient scolding which they certainly deserved, He shared His cup with them. This is the fellowship of Christ's sufferings in which so many others would share. (Cf. Phil. 3:10; Ro. 8:17; 2 Co. 1:5-7; 4:10; 1 Co. 15:31; 2 Ti. 2:3, 11-13; 1 Pt. 4:13) In so saying, He generously gave them a word and a motive that would hold them steady in the years to come. The mere observation that John was not beheaded with James, his brother, by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (Ac. 12:2), but permitted to live to suffer imprisonment (Ac. 4:3; 5:18); and beating (5:40) and at last the persecution of exile on Patmos island at an extremely old age (Rev. 1:9), cannot be interpreted to mean that he did not also experience the suffering the Lord predicted for both dauntless brothers. True, the circumstances of their suffering differed, but their undying devotion to the Lord was identical.

It may be doubted that, at this point, the brothers would have considered beheading or exile to be such precious honors, had they known to what He referred, since it would have meant being stripped of earthly glory and freedom, and being hurled into the grave or miles and years distant from the center of the action. And yet, despite the blunt promise of suffering ahead for these men, it did not even occur to them to back down. They fully intended to maintain their loyal commitment to Him, cost what it might. Only later would they agree that to suffer for the name of Jesus is the source of true joy and privilege. (Mt. 5:10-12; Ac. 5:41; 16:25; 1 Pt. 4:13)

For us, sharing in Christ's suffering may mean the limited cruelty of martyrdom or the long-suffering of daily Christian living, living out a lifetime of self-giving service. This latter discipline, so constant and so full of struggle, is as fully to follow Christ as is the other. We must dedicate ourselves daily to be ready for either.

#### 4. REFUSAL: "God's rules decide places of honor."

**But to sit on my right hand, and on my left hand is not mine to give; but . . . for whom it hath been prepared of my Father.** What, if anything, should be inserted in the space represented by the dots in this elliptical phrase?

1. Does Jesus mean that the right to assign such honor is not in His own hands at all, but is the exclusive right of the Father? Arndt-Gingrich (37) believe that the phrase in question has been shortened from "it is not mine . . . but the Father, who will give to those for whom it is prepared by Him," as if the Greek phrase ran: *ouk emòn . . . allà toû patròs, hòs dósei hoîs hetoîmastai hup'-autoû*. This invention of "missing" words, however, could misunderstand how Jesus will reward His followers. (Mt. 16:27; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:22-30; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Ro. 2:16; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8; 1 Co. 4:4f; 2 Co. 5:10; Rev. 22:12; cf. Isa. 62:11)
2. Or does Jesus mean He can give the places of honor only to those for whom they were planned by God? If so, He is saying, "To sit . . . is not mine to grant except to those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." Evidence that "but" (*allà*) can mean "except" comes from Rocci (73) who, among other uses of *allà*, affirms that "in the sense of a restrictive adversative after a negative proposition . . . expression with *ou, ou tís, oudéis, tís*, etc., *allà* can be translated: except, unless, apart from, but." To state Jesus' proposition positively, we have: "I can grant such honors only to those for whom my Father has prepared them."

It really makes little difference, because the fact that Jesus limits His distribution of honors to follow the Father's ordaining means that God has already decided, even if Jesus Himself will make the actual distribution.

The meaning, then, is: "I cannot assign such honors on the basis of patronage and favoritism, or on any basis other than God's principles of perfect fairness." Not caprice, then, or personal preferences, but the eternal will and counsel of God is the standard upon which such judgments are made. Precedence and preference will proceed on this basis established by God, and Jesus has no intention of changing it by nepotism, favoritism or patronage. So Jesus does not, indeed cannot, deny that differences of rank in the Kingdom exist. (See on 18:4.) Rather, He specifies in whose hands rightly rests the judgment about their proper distribution. His principle of precedence is the Father's choice that only those who perform the greatest service for others shall be most highly awarded. This is no esoteric doctrine, but the common principle of loving service that He will repeat in 20:25-28 and which constituted the fundamental basis of the entire message on personal relations. (Mt. 18) So, the only predestination here is the Father's choice of what kind

of character would be judged worthy of honor. It is then up to men to take Him at His word and qualify for the honors by rendering the most useful service in Jesus' name. This is the same kind of predestination seen in our own salvation, i.e. God determined what class of people are going to be saved, and we determine to be in that class. (Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pt. 1:2; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

This means that, although man must commit himself in total devotion, everything depends upon God whose will determines the distribution of the honors. (Cf. 19:30—20:16) Thus, Jesus stresses His own faithfulness to God's will. God is in total control, hence no man can take this control out of His hands by putting God in debt to him on the basis of supposed worthiness or merits, good deeds or fleshly relationship to Jesus, or anything else. This theme of the total Lordship of God is an important, security-building concept intended to strengthen disciples tempted to throw everything overboard and return to Judaism or the world and make shipwreck of their souls. (See on 10:26-31; 40-42; 11:25-27; 17:5; 20:1-16; Cf. Heb. 10:26-39; 12:25-29; 13:10-16; 1 Ti. 1:18-20; 6:13-16; 2 Ti. 4:10)

So the right to preregister for chief places in the Kingdom is a claim made by human pride, hence unworthy of anyone who understands that his own position in the Kingdom is itself only possible because of the grace of the King and the essential humility of the servant.

### C. THE OTHER APOSTLES ARE JEALOUS OF JAMES AND JOHN (20:24; Mk. 10:41).

20:24 **And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren.** Is not this sulking, small-minded jealousy typical of us all? Their own self-pride moved them to resent the opportunistic pride of James and John who had merely taken unfair advantage to seize what they all coveted! The two brothers had only shown shrewd initiative in expressing the identical desire that motivated the ambition of every one of them! They all wanted to be at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, but James and John had outmaneuvered them. (See on 18:1.) And yet, little did the Ten dream that so far as earthly prizes were concerned, the honors that would fall to the sons of Zebedee would be James' honor of being the first apostolic martyr and John's distinction of having his suffering prolonged.

This unedifying spectacle of Jesus' band of disciples is surprisingly edifying just because of its being true to life. This is not the sort of fanciful saint-forging that a fiction writer would produce in those days. (Check out the apocryphal hack writing being published as "Gospels" in the first century!) Whereas the ancient pagans did depict the sordid lives of even the greatest heroes and their gods, they were not objectively employed in the service of a true living God whose stern standards of truth and righteousness had been drilled into His people for centuries. Such inappropriate pride and selfishness as we witness here must disqualify the disciples for sainthood in the eyes of the creators of fiction. Nevertheless, for the Gospel writers who tell it like it is, this spectacle traces a real situation that actually occurred in the lives of men who later developed into the spiritual giants we so highly respect now.

#### D. JESUS REPEATS HIS PRINCIPLE OF TRUE GREATNESS

(20:25-28; Mk. 10:42-45)

1. "Worldly greatness consists in the power wielded over the most people."

20:25 **But Jesus called them unto him**, almost like a father would gather his quarrelling children around him to admonish them. He must stop this incipient fracture in His group at once. Yet His tone is the quiet solemnity of a Man who first controls His own emotions in order to cool the flames of others. Rather than enter into greater detail about the martyrdom and suffering of James and John about which they probably would have longed to know more, Jesus turns the conversation to what must inevitably involve the self-sacrifice of every other disciple. Rather than prophesy the gruesome details of every Apostle's future destiny, and so crush them with information they could not bear, Jesus repeated the concepts that would mature them to face something perhaps more difficult than heroic martyrdom: to face and conquer the daily humdrum of life. Learning to give one's life without reservation to Christ and others in the ordinary service of life is the only way to be mature enough to gain the honors in the Kingdom.

**Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.** Does He intend a parallelism here, or is He describing a hierarchical pyramid?

1. In form, Jesus' words have the sound of a typical Hebrew parallelism which in the second member repeats a concept stated in the first. This explanation has the advantage of finding itself in the company of another parallelism in vv. 26, 27, which begins with "Not so shall it be among you," and the shorter parallelism of v. 28 after "even as the Son of man came . . ." If so, He may intend to indicate nothing more than the picture of any governmental system where people issue orders and expect others to serve them.
2. Or does He mean to describe a hierarchical pyramid? If so, *the Gentiles* at the bottom are ruled by their *rulers* who are themselves subject to the authority of *their great ones*. By an interesting ambiguity involved in "their" and "them" (the third time), it is left unclear whether the tyranny of the subordinates is directed at their own subordinates or at their own superiors. In the first case, He is saying that the abusive treatment shown the people by their kings or emperors is bad enough, but tyrannizing by the royal representatives and time-serving bureaucrats is intolerably worse. In the second, if "them" refers to *the rulers*, then He means that kings and emperors may be masters over the people, but the ruler's lieutenants actually manage those on the throne as "the power behind the throne." In an absolutist oriental monarchy the first sort of despotism would be the case; in a more democratic type of government the latter would be the case. Either way, however, the people are always under the heel of their superiors who repress and oppress them wherever they can.

What is Jesus' fundamental emphasis: power struggle or power structure? Both, because the nouns picture the structure, while the verbs picture the struggle: **lord it over them** (*katakurieúo*, cf. Ac. 19:16: "to master"; 1 Pt. 5:3: "to domineer") and **exercise authority over them** (*katexousiázo*, used only here in NT and apparently unknown elsewhere.)

It is highly significant that Jesus contrasted His own messianic community with the civil government of pagan nations. Since this pyramid of power had been the basis of the disciples' thinking, by reflection He quietly exposed the disciples' spirit as pagan, unrepresentative of the theocratic ideal of Israel, and not at all in harmony with His own thinking. The characteristic most typical of those societies' rulers is that same spirit which motivated His own Apostles in their own power struggle: the lording it over their subordinates

and the exercising authority over them. Jesus is not merely attacking abuse of power, but the concept of power structures itself, even when the individual rulers themselves are relatively benign benefactors of their people. (Cf. Lk. 22:25) While He is perfectly open to civil government as such (Mt. 22:21; cf. Ro. 13:1-7; 1 Pt. 2:13-17), His messianic community is not to be structured along the lines of the secular state.

2. "Greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the number of people you are able to serve." (20:26, 27)

20:26 **Not so shall it be among you.** This is the Lord's final word on the question of hierarchy and power structures in the Church. If everything said earlier (Mt. 18:1-35) had seemed unclear and noncommittal on the question of ecclesiastical hierarchy—although in fact it was not—this sentence cannot be so interpreted. In fact, the servant's attitude is the very antithesis to the type of tyrannical structure typical of pagan rulers, a concept that stresses everything Jesus taught in that discourse on personal relations in the Kingdom. (For fuller notes see on Mt. 18.) If the Church is to be different from the struggle and structure of civil government, the Christian who is the moral opposite of those who tyrannize others, then, is a person who serves them. He follows a policy diametrically opposed to that so characteristic of the unbelieving world. In the Christian community, the duty of serving, paradoxically, falls to those who are its great ones. In fact, if they do not serve, they are simply not great ones! As Gonzales-Ruiz (*Marco*, 187) said it:

Therefore any Church that is not the image of the State completely turned upside down does not correspond at all to the original plan of its Founder. This is why the worst sin of the Church is that of organizing itself along lines that reflect the image and likeness of the State, or of inserting itself into its structure to become an integral part of it.

Nothing could be clearer, or as little respected, as the Lord's intolerance toward the priestly despotism shown in all versions of Christendom, whether it be the Catholic (Latin or Greek) or Protestant systems, or whether it be the virtual dictatorships exercised over their constituencies by local preachers, editors, elders of churches of Christ who, despite their proclaimed aversion to hierarchical systems



and monarchical bishoprics as practiced by others, nonetheless crack the whip "to maintain the purity of the faith" (meaning: "keep things under my control").

**Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant.**

(For fuller notes, see on 18:1 where comment is made on Mk. 9:35.) Are **minister** (*diákonos*, v. 26) and **servant** (*doûlos*, v. 27) synonyms, or do they represent a descending scale at which the ministry and death of the Son of man is the very bottom? (v. 28) If this latter is the case, then, according to Jesus, the lower we go on the scale of human values, the higher we rise in God's judgment!

Whereas the **minister** (*diákonos*) might be thought of as a "servant" free or slave, the **slave** (*doûlos*, from *déo*, "to bind" and *holos*, "wholly") would have been considered as anyone bound to his owner to serve in whatever capacity he could. His lot was as varied as his masters, from the very best to the unspeakably bad, with all shades and grades in between. It is not clear whether the Lord intended these words in their denotative or connotative sense, i.e. the legal and social status of these persons or their resultant attitude and character.

1. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 749, note 713) balks at translating these two words "servant" and "slave," because of the connotative ideas of "lack of freedom, unwilling service, cruel treatment, etc." so closely attached especially to the word "slave." He opts for "servant" for *diákonos* and "humble attendant" for *doûlos*.
2. However, as Bartchy (*First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians* 7:21, 37-120) has shown we are the ones who must revise their concept of "slavery" in the Greco-Roman world of the centuries preceding and immediately following the Christian revelations.

In addition to what has already been written on 18:1-35, we must ask what would the first century Christians have understood Jesus to mean by urging that the only proper attitude in His Kingdom was to identify themselves with the position and character of a *diákonos* or a *doûlos*? To appreciate the position of slaves and freedmen (who were little better than slaves and often crippled by contracts yet to fulfil toward their former master), one must have a clear picture of the Mediterranean world of that century. Scott Bartchy's *First-Century Slavery* is especially helpful in this regard, not only because he furnishes a wide-ranging historical survey of both law and customs in this field, but especially because of the necessary

corrective he brings to our common preconceptions about what it meant to be a slave or a freedman in the times of Jesus and Paul.

So, if we sincerely intend to identify ourselves with the slave class and take Jesus seriously, making ourselves the voluntary slaves of others, it would be very worthwhile to examine what Christian exhortations were addressed to those who were legally slaves as part of a definite, wide-spread social structure in the first-century world. (Study Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Ti. 6:1, 2; Ti. 2:9, 10; 1 Pt. 2:18ff in harmony with 2:16!)

In short, there are no ring-side seats for honored spectators in God's Kingdom, just places of service down beside the King Himself who is busy washing feet, mediating for others and dying for sinners. (Jn. 13:12-17; Ro. 8:29; 1 Pt. 2:21ff)

3. "My own life of service and death for others is the standard!"  
(20:28)

20:28 **even as the Son of man** means that His marvelous self-sacrifice is the standard whereby greatness is to be measured. (See all notes on 18:1-14, studying specifically how everything Jesus affirmed in that section so aptly applied to Himself.) And yet His own supreme example is not set forth here as a mere model of humility. His sentence structure reveals another emphasis: **Whoever would be great . . . and . . . first among you must be . . . even as the Son of man.** Although the disciples refused at that time to accept His "uncomfortable, pessimistic talk about crosses," they must learn that the cross lay not only squarely across His path to the crown, but was also at the heart of His great mission to earth. They had interrupted His talk about death, in order to talk about position and power. He must now interrupt their pursuit of power, to make them see that self-denial and service—**EVEN TO DEATH**—is the shortest route to real power, to being *first* and *great*. He expected the disciples to learn that His own case furnishes illustration of His personal method of gaining the mastery over men. They must learn the connection between self-giving service and arriving at power in the spiritual world. They must see that, however strange or original it may have seemed to them, His own method for earning His crown is superior to all other methods of receiving thrones, whether it be by inheriting them respectably, or by seizing them in battle, or by base bribery. This is because these latter methods either left the will

of the governed completely out of the account, or, worse, forced or tricked them into compliance against their will. But the uniqueness of Jesus' method lay in His mission to place Himself at the service of mankind, so that men would love Him and willingly submit to Him as their King, and thus He would become Ruler over a people eager to please Him, swept to the throne by their sense of grateful devotion. Even more striking than the originality of Jesus' method, when contrasted with the usual routes to glory, is its unquestionable success. Let us add our "Amen" to the voices of millions of Christians who with all their hearts have echoed the doxology of the Apostle John: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." (Rev. 1:5, 6) Nothing could be clearer than the way Jesus connected self-giving service and the right to rule. Love that sacrifices itself for others has power to conquer and rule over others' hearts, and thus guarantee the kind of sway over others that can be attained in no other way than by girding oneself with the towel of humility and placing oneself at the disposition of others as their servant. The expression, **even as the Son of man**, demonstrates for all time how this King proved the effectiveness of His method by taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and by winning for Himself the sort of sovereignty that we willingly confess today. In short, Jesus applies the pragmatic test to His method and, by His results, demonstrates that it will work for us as it did for Him! This is the reason for His paradoxical ecclesiology and the motivation of His unusual government policy: loving ministry to others is the secret of success and the road to true greatness. So, if greatness in the Kingdom and usefulness to God depends upon being like the King, and sharing His viewpoints and mission, then the greatest distinctions and highest titles will obviously fall to those who are most like Him in sacrificial service even to the point of death for others.

**The Son of man came to give his life a ransom for many.** Whether or not the disciples fully appreciated what it meant to be the son of man come from glory (see notes on 8:20), however, now, after His triumph, this sentence measures the full height and depth of His love. (2 Co. 8:9; Eph. 5:25; 1 Jn. 4:10; Jn. 15:13; Ro. 5:6-11) But even before, the disciples had witnessed nothing but generous ministering to the needs of others on the part of Him whom they had come to recognize as their Messianic King. Had they yet no basis for understanding the King or His Kingdom? He will *give his life*:

His self-sacrifice will be voluntary. (Cf. Jn. 10:11, 15, 18) He was not only sent by the Father, but of His own accord **He came to give His life a ransom**. Whereas we cannot choose to be born nor do we normally choose our own death, Jesus claimed these as acts born of His own free choice.

**Give his life a ransom for many.** (Cf. Isa. 53:4-8, 10-12) Here is the foundation for the expiation for our sins and for our justification: Jesus will lay down His own innocent life in payment for (*anti pollôn*) the lives of many who cannot ransom themselves. (Cf. Psa. 49:7-9, 15) Literally, a **ransom** (*lútron*) is the price paid to free a slave or someone held prisoner for redemption. It may also be an expiation for wrong-doing. (Rocci, 1167; Arndt-Gingrich, 483f) It is the agreed legal equivalent for the persons redeemed. **Many** has two emphases:

1. Potential: **Many**, does not mean "not all," as if we ought to think Jesus did not intend to die potentially for every man. (1 Ti. 2:6; 1 Jn. 2:2) **Many** is the antithesis of a privileged "few" or perhaps the antithesis of the one Human Being who can accomplish this for many, not merely dying for Himself alone. **Many**, here, has the same meaning as that of "many" (*polloi*) in Paul. (Ro. 5:15, 19) Contextually, it is clear that Paul meant "all" (*pántas anthrópous*). (Ro. 5:18)
2. Actual: and yet, sadly, this word **many**, considered, not as the potential of Jesus' sacrifice but as describing the real number of people who will finally avail themselves of it, in the end, really does mean "not all," (Mt. 7:14)

An interesting question for further investigation involves Jesus' unusual demand in this text that those for whom He would **give His life as a ransom** should consider themselves, not primarily as free men, but as *servants* and *slaves*. The modern reader might ask, "But if He ransomed them, surely they would not thereafter consider themselves slaves in any sense." But it does not work that way. The person who is dearly purchased out of bitter slavery owes his happiness, fruitful employment and present security to his new Master. For a person who owns nothing and owes everything, to repay such a debt of gratitude is only possible through willing personal service. In fact, the decision to ransom this slave may have been based on a contract made with the new Master. Therefore, the ransomed do not move into the insecurity and uncertainty of absolute freedom with its attendant dangers for which the former slave is unprepared

to cope, but into the good service of a kind Master whose slavery is pure joy compared with the alternatives. (Study Ro. 6:15-23, esp. v. 18; 1 Co. 6:19f; 7:22f; 1 Pt. 1:18f; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22—4:1; Philemon 16; cf. Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*.) In fact, the slavery to Jesus Christ is so radically different from that to self, sin and Satan, that paradoxically there is a sense in which the redeemed can be thought of as the only truly "free men." (Study Peter's interesting paradox: "as free men . . . as slaves of God" (*hos eleútheroi . . . all' hos theou dóuloi*, 1 Pt. 2:16). This fresh understanding of slavery to Christ should turn on new lights in texts where Paul and others willingly declare themselves "bondslaves of Jesus Christ" (e.g. Ro. 1:1) and "your slaves for Jesus' sake." (e.g. 2 Co. 4:5)

What is the picture, then? The world into which Jesus Christ came is a world full of slaves, a world characterized by oppression and abuse of power, a world where might makes right, and back of it all is the devil. But to purchase these slaves from their just condemnation, Jesus did not come to be, together with His Church, merely a new king or emperor or benefactor, but armed with the same sort of structured imperial might as that encountered in the world systems. Rather, to defeat the cruel world power that leaves men its slaves and bring them out of their bondage, paradoxically, He too became a slave to minister and to turn His own life over to suffer the righteous verdict of death for sin, in exchange for the freedom of sin's victims. (Mt. 26:28; Romans; Phil. 2:5-9; 1 Ti. 2:6; Heb. 2:9, 14-18; 9:27; 1 Pt. 1:18f; 2:24; 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:2; 2 Co. 5:14f, 21) To free the victims He Himself became a Victim to end the victimizing. The point? His Church must not present itself as a "Christian Government" as a political alternative to the "demonic world or state governments of the present age." Jesus categorically refused to fight fire with fire. And His Church must live and function and conquer as a community in whose heart the cancer of power—whether ecclesiastical or political—does not exist. It is rather as a fellowship of servants that it will be able, without political ambitions or power structures, to help free humanity from the forces that enslave it. (Cf. González-Ruiz, *Marco*, 189)

NOTE: This concept does not speak directly to the problem of Christians' participation in civil government and the execution of its laws. The Lord is, rather, discussing what His disciple as a private citizen must be in relation to other private citizens and what His Kingdom must be in relation to other world kingdoms.

Ministering in the service of God as a sword-bearing magistrate is already assumed as a valid option. (Ro. 13:1-7) So also is the disciples' responsibility to pay the bills of civil government. (Mt. 22:21) So, Jesus' discussion of pagan rulers does not intend to reject the proper authority of civil government.

What does this magnificent declaration reveal to us about Jesus?

1. Plummer (*Matthew*, 281) asks:

Is not the combination of humility and majesty which is found in this saying a guarantee for its genuineness? Could it have been invented? Who is this, who in the same utterance, and in the most simple and natural way, declares that He is the servant of everybody, and that His single life is able to ransom many? There is no boasting and no manifest exaggeration in either declaration; nothing but a calm statement of fact, made by One who is confident that He is saying the simple truth.

2. Bruce (*Training*, 288) sees it too:

Then this saying, while breathing the spirit of utter lowliness, at the same time betrays the consciousness of superhuman dignity. Had Jesus not been more than man, His language would not have been humble, but presumptuous. Why should the son of a carpenter say of himself, I came not to be ministered unto? Servile position and occupation was a matter of course for such a one. The statement before us is rational and humble only as coming from one who, being in the form of God, freely assumed the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death for our salvation.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. How did Jesus answer the request for chief seats in the Kingdom? What did He mean by His "cup" and "baptism"?
2. In whose hands and on what basis rightly rests the distribution of the highest honors in the Kingdom?
3. Who is the greatest in the Kingdom? How did Jesus illustrate His own answer to this question? Where else is this same question discussed in Matthew?
4. Who asked such a boon? Who aided their request? Why was

- this particular person enlisted to word their desire? From what point of view did the request arise?
5. In what respect did Jesus say emphatically that His Kingdom would be different from that of the rulers of the nations of the world?
  6. Quote Matthew 20:28 and Luke 19:10. What else did Jesus say at any time about the cause and purpose for which He came into the world?
  7. Did James and John prove true to their confident assertion of readiness to drink of Jesus' cup and be baptized with His baptism? If so, how or when? If not, why not?
  8. According to Jesus, are there really any chief places in the Kingdom to grant? If so, how are they to be distributed?
  9. According to Jesus, what kind of ambition must a Christian have?
  10. What does this section have to say to the larger question of power structures and hierarchical control among Jesus' disciples today?
  11. List the texts in Matthew 18 which find their practical application in this section.

### Section 53

## JESUS HEALS TWO BLIND MEN AT JERICHO

(Parallels: Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43)

TEXT: 20:29-34

29 And as they went out from Jericho, a great multitude followed him. 30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the way side, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 31 And the multitude rebuked them, that they should hold their peace: but they cried out the more, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 32 And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you? 33 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. 34 And Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes; and straight-way they received their sight, and followed him.