

Matthew 20:20–28

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- [0 : 0 0] Again, that's Matthew 20, 20 to 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 on 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.
- [1 : 1 7] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, happy Thanksgiving. It's good to be with you.
- I haven't been here for the last few weeks, and the reason why has a lot to do with the job that I have. One of the great blessings of my life, having been a senior pastor for many years, is to not be one anymore.
- Now, the reason why that's great is because it gives me the ability to do things that normal pastors don't get to do.
- So for the last two weeks as resident pastor for ministry apprenticeships at this church, I was able to serve two other churches here in the Chicago area.
- And so, as fun as that is, it's always great to be here, and it's always great to be preaching. So would you pray with me as we get started?
- [2 : 2 2] Lord, grant that all of us here may engage in contemplating the mysteries of your heavenly wisdom with increasing devotion to your glory and our edification.
- Amen. Does any of you, like, have status? I used to have status. And I'm not going to lie. It was great.
- I had airline status. Now, it wasn't the, like, greatest status of the world. There's those freaks of nature that just, like, walk on the plane with, like, a red carpet, and they roll that sucker up, and they're like, now the rest of you.
- But I still had status. And the greatest part about status is status on airlines is great for lots of reasons. One of the reasons it just makes travel easier. But if I'm honest, the best part about airline status was that I got to get on the plane before you.
- It wasn't before everybody, but at least it was before most people. Now, of course, remember that I said I had status. I'm getting on a plane next week.

[3 : 34] I no longer have status. And there is nothing worse than having had status and having status no longer. Now I have to wait while everybody else gets on the plane and then eventually get on the plane.

Now, the irony is we all get on the plane. There's still something that misses the status that I used to have. I mean, isn't life, most of life, like this?

While it's a small thing when it comes to who gets on the plane first, there is always this tension between those who have certain statuses and privileges and those who don't.

It seems like the way of the world. You might get it however you can, and then once you've got it, grasp it as hard as you can to never let it go. And then if you lose it, you're just bummed out in life.

Why is it that all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, long for the world to be different? I mean, shoot, is Christianity any different?

[4 : 48] Our text today claims that Christianity is rather different. In fact, if this text is true, then it claims that Christianity is supposed to be a foretaste of the kind of world we all want.

One that is quite backward from the world that we all experience. The world, let's be honest, that we loathe. And yet the world we're tempted to go along with.

So Christians, I hope this text before us is as convicting as it is comforting. And if you're not a Christian, I hope this text is rather compelling. This is the 13th of 14 lessons in the book of Matthew as we're traveling along with Jesus, learning what it means to follow him as king.

Last week, we learned that generosity is the currency of Jesus' kingdom. And this week, Matthew keeps talking about this whole kingdom of Jesus thing.

Here it is. This is the 13th lesson, which will also serve as the title of this sermon. There are no power plays in Jesus' kingdom. It's a bold claim, I know, but what if it's true?

[6 : 05] The question that I want to answer in this sermon is this. Is Jesus' kingdom really as backward as it seems? And if so, what does that mean for me?

The whole story is pretty simple. It's a single scene. It's really broken up just by the two different conversations that are had.

The first one is kind of a private audience. It's right there in verses 20 to 23. There's a very tight connection between what comes before this and this scene because as you can see right there in verse 20, it says, then...

What comes before this? What was just said that this is such a tight connection with? Well, just read 17 to 19.

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the 12 disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.

[7 : 28] Quite sobering news. Not only that, but it's helpful to keep in mind what Jesus said back in chapter 18 at the beginning. In verses 1 through 5, he's rebuked the disciples, which are just the merry band of followers that are traveling along with him.

In verses 1 through 5 of chapter 18, they're squabbling over who's going to be the greatest, and Jesus goes, Whoa, time out! He tells them all, Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, why bring this up? Well, because both of those instances, them fighting and saying, Whoa, no, it's the children who are the greatest, and then I am going to die after I'm beaten.

I'll be crucified. Both of those things are important to understand how darkly hilarious this scene is.

James and John, who are at times given the nickname the Sons of Thunder, have their mom come ask Jesus for a favor.

[8 : 45] I can only imagine. I don't know whose idea it was, what exactly the purpose was behind this, but what we do know is that she comes to Jesus like he's royalty.

Verse 20, she comes and kneels before him. Her petition is as simple as it is insane.

Verse 21, 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. These positions, it's like it would be today, the right hand and the left, these are the prominent positions of power.

In other words, she says, Hey look, I know you're going into a kingdom, so why don't you give my son some status? You might be thinking, Hold on a second.

This doesn't quite track logically. I mean, if it's right on the heels of what Jesus said and there's a connection between what Jesus just said, then, if I heard you right, it sounds like Jesus said that he's going to be beaten, he's going to die and be raised on the third day.

[10 : 01] There's nothing about a kingdom there at all. So where does this idea come from? Well, interestingly enough, it comes from that little title that Jesus gives himself in verses 17 and 19.

A son of man. Now, this comes from Daniel chapter 7 and Daniel chapter 7 describes a mighty ruler who's going to come and rule over all the kingdoms of the world given the power to do so by God himself.

And what Matthew has been demonstrating from the very beginning of this book up until this point is that Jesus is the son of man and he knows it. So you go, okay, well, I get that, but still, what the heck is happening in this text?

It still doesn't completely make sense and believe me, it doesn't make sense. It could be that the disciples are just like, well, listen, he's being hyperbolic. I mean, shoot, just back in chapter 18, he said, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck that sucker out.

And as Joe taught us a few months ago, like this, he's not saying like go around with a fork and just anytime your eye causes you to sin, just rip that thing out. He's exaggerating for the purpose of instruction and so maybe he's doing so now.

[11 : 24] I'm gonna go and be beaten and I'm gonna die and they're like, that's a good metaphor for life being hard. So, let's get past all that to the whole reigning and ruling thing. We don't exactly know what is going on in their minds.

Regardless, they aren't paying attention. In other words, they don't care about what Jesus is saying about himself. All they care is about the good bits that Jesus has brought up along the way.

And so they're going, okay, okay, okay. Forget what you say about yourself. Here's what I want to focus on. Does that sound familiar? Friends, let me just be real clear with you.

Jesus is not up for being whatever you want him to be. Now notice that Jesus doesn't deny he's going to get a kingdom at any point in here.

He just proclaims that the brothers are ignorant and proves it. Notice that the mother is ignored in Jesus' response. There she is at his feet asking for the sons and it is as if Jesus looks at this poor woman, raises his eyes to the sons of thunder and goes, really?

[12 : 40] Let me just look at his response. Verse 22, Jesus answered, you do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?

And they said, we are able. Sure, no problem. Pass that thing on over here. What the heck is this cup? Well, all the way through the Bible, often in poetic form, this cup is spoken of as the cup of suffering.

That God's people were to drink, that God's servant was to drink. So they're just like, are you able to suffer with me? They're like, yeah, no problem. Whatever the heck that cup thing is, bring it on.

As long as we can sit on the right hand and left hand, we'll do whatever. And Jesus lets them in on a secret. They'll get the suffering, but they won't get the status.

Verse 23, you will drink my cup, but to sit on my right hand and my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those whom it has been prepared by my Father.

[13 : 49] Friends, it becomes instantly evident that there are no power plays in Jesus' kingdom. suffering, as explained and exemplified throughout the New Testament, is a necessary entailment of what it means to follow Jesus.

If you are a Christian, you are called to follow Jesus. That's all the word means, little Jesus, little Christ, one who follows after Jesus. So whatever happens to Jesus, you should expect to happen to you.

So suffering should never be a bewildering thing, although it is never an easy thing. And if you're not a Christian, I'll be honest with you, this is what we're asking you to sign up for, a lifetime of suffering.

That sounds great. Jesus goes, not because you're special, but because you're my followers.

You're not getting the status. Suffering doesn't buy you any status in the kingdom of heaven. Now you might be thinking, okay, okay, all right.

[15 : 05] So two down, billions to go. If it's not these two who get to sit at Jesus' right hand and left hand, who is it?

Because, you know, maybe it's me. I have no clue. No. It's very possible that it's no one.

That Jesus gets into his kingdom and he sits there and the chairs on his right and his left just have those little reserve signs on them. Not you, not anybody. I don't know, Jesus is king of his kingdom, but there will be no vice kings.

Just as it doesn't matter when you get into the kingdom, as we learned last week, so it doesn't matter how much you scheme to get to the top in Jesus' kingdom.

You can try all you want, but there is no power plays in this kingdom. It's not going to get you anywhere or do you any good. Maybe Jesus' kingdom is as backwards as we hope it might be.

[16 : 16] I mean, shoot, doesn't that sound compelling? That you don't have to scheme to race to the top. Just in case we're confused about what Jesus is trying to get across, we get some clarification as the camera pans out a bit and we see that this private audience really isn't as private as it looks at first glance.

See, we move from a private audience in verses 20 to 23 to a public announcement in verses 24 to 28. This is one of the most hilarious and sad parts of this story.

The camera pulls back and we see that the other disciples, the other ten, are right there listening to this whole thing going on. I can only imagine if I was one of the ten disciples and I see James and John come with their mom and go, oh, what's up, mom?

What are you, oh, wait, hold on a second. Kneeling before Jesus and they go, oh, this is, can my son sit at your right hand, your left hand, drink the cup, you know, it's not for me to give.

Now again, if I'm one of the ten disciples, I think maybe it's me. I know it's not them. Notice how they respond to the request on the part of the mom.

[17 : 43] It's like being in a house full of boys and there's one cookie left on the table. And one of your scheming brothers asks for the cookie and you relentlessly beat the mess out of that brother.

Not because you care about your mom, but because you want the cookie too. It would be nice to be like, oh, these other ten are just so holy and not seeking of status that they are simply like, how could you, dear brother, approach Jesus with your mom about something like that?

But no, the whole book leading up to this and you can just keep reading today and you'll figure out after this, the disciples, all of them, all twelve are as confused as anybody else.

They don't get it. They just want to get to the top. So Jesus, again, just like in chapter 18, calls a time out in verse 25 and huddles them all up again.

He breaks up the fight and brings some clarification to the confusion and what he says to them, he speaks to all of us as well.

[19 : 07] He begins his public announcement by conceding that those in power in the world often lead by force.

notice, it's right there in verse 25. Jesus called them to him and said, do you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them?

I mean, friends, isn't that the world that you and I live in? Those in power often lead by force. It's the way the world goes. If you're like, I can't believe our politicians today.

Well, I mean, it's no different than it was 2,000 years ago. It doesn't make it good. It just means it's normal. But shoot, it's election season, isn't it? Tragically, those who are either in power or want to be in power don't really have much to say.

They're just like, I'm better than the other guy. I'm the one who can either save or preserve the soul of the nation. And it's just a battle of like, who's lying less?

[20 : 20] Cool. And we're all like, this is terrible. But I guess that's just the way the world goes. And maybe, just like a lot of other people, you're pretty cynical.

It makes sense. You can't really do anything about it. As Bing said, I used to be a missionary in Nicaragua. And if you just had to sum up Nicaragua in two words, it'd be this.

Ready? Dumpster fire. Like, bad. Mainly because the political leader there is one of the craziest people in the world.

And you're like, oh, no way. Like, I know some crazy. No, you don't. Like, seriously, just go on YouTube and check it out. It will blow your mind. Leading by force.

It's easy to just become cynical and go, I guess that's what, that's what it all is. Leaders who lead by force might be how it goes in the world.

[21 : 26] According to Jesus, verse 26, it shall not be so among you. Now, let me be clear. That doesn't mean that there's no leadership in the church.

The church doesn't benefit from having good leaders. So many rebel against any idea of formalized authority today, both inside and outside the church. But let's just be honest.

You can't escape from authority. Like, even if you're, like, the most rebellious human on earth, that's just because you want to run the world. And let's be honest. If you ran the world, it'd be over in, like, five minutes.

I'd love to meet with you afterwards and hear your plan for peace in the Middle East. It's probably laughable. Just like mine. It's like, I don't know, just pass out sandwiches and have lunch.

Leadership isn't the problem. Leadership in the church is just as necessary as it is in the elementary school lunch line.

[22 : 35] Like, without lunch ladies, none of us would be here today because it would all be Lord of the Flies and we would all be done for. Or just like it would be, like, in a PhD cohort on, like, astrophysics or whatever, which is a word I probably shouldn't use because I don't think I can spell it.

No, you need leadership in all those things. It's not a matter of leading but lording over people. Power plays may be the way of the world, a world we all loathe, of course, unless we're at the top, but they have no place in Jesus' kingdom.

So what does Jesus' kingdom look like? Well, Jesus himself will tell us in verse 26, whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

Simply put, Jesus' kingdom looks like service towards others. In other words, Jesus' kingdom is backward in the best way imaginable.

Here's the profound irony. I don't care where you come from or what you believe. don't you love it when other people act in this kind of way?

[24 : 13] Don't you love it when other people go out of their way to serve those around them? And maybe the most profound irony is that we always find excuses to not do so when it comes to our turn.

I mean, I would. I love it when he does, but the thing is let me be clear.

Jesus' kingdom is not a race to out-serve one another. That's just a power play by another means. It's a race to the bottom.

Well, I'm doing all of this so I should make the decisions around here. You're like, okay, slow your roll. I've been around church for a long time and just as much as there is a problem with lording it over people in church, so is that awkward minority that's just like, I'm the suffering one so I get to say.

There's no power plays in Jesus' kingdom. It doesn't work. You can try. Jesus is just going to sit back and laugh and go, I'm the king of the kingdom and none of this matters.

[25 : 19] What are you doing? You might think, okay, here's the thing though, man.

Like serving other people is really hard. Especially if there's nothing I'm going to get out of it. So why should I do this? I've only got one reason.

It's the reason Jesus gives. It's right there in verse 28. Here Jesus provides a great example of leadership. Even as the son of man, speaking of himself again, came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

The justification for living in this backwards kinds of way is found in the fact that Jesus does so for all who trust in him.

He doesn't come to be served. That's the way of the world, but to serve. And as he says here, to give his life as a ransom. What the heck does that mean? Simply this, Jesus is going to give his own life in order that others might go free.

[26 : 35] Free from what? Well, lots of things. For example, free from experiencing the punishment that we so rightly deserve.

What do I deserve punishment for? Just take this morning as an example. We won't have testimony time. We could. That would be fun. But we won't do it. Punishment for all the things that you know you should have done and didn't do.

Or know you shouldn't have done and did. All of those things. Jesus goes, no, I'll be the ransom to set them free. Or the ransom to free us from the power plays that we're so often drawn to.

Either the race to the top or the race to the bottom. I just want to be better. And Jesus goes, you don't have to be. And not only the freedom from, but the freedom for.

The freedom for a life of service toward others. Without the need to stay up all night and wondering if you're gonna win. Friends, through trust in Jesus, we all get the only status we'll ever need.

[27 : 55] The kind of status that every human has always longed for. The status of belonging to Jesus' kingdom. A kingdom that is just as backward as we wish the world was.

A kingdom where we all serve each other. Not as a power play, but simply out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for us. And friend, if you're not a Christian and you're like, I don't even know what that means, but that sounds pretty cool, come talk to me afterwards.

Because believe me, the news is as crazy as it is good. But it's true. Friends, if you're a Christian, take heart and give up.

Because you don't need to race to the top or race to the bottom. through trust in Jesus worked out in a life of service. As we learned last week, we all get on the plane.

But in Jesus' kingdom, the plane loads from the back. And it doesn't really matter where you sit. Jesus' kingdom is just as backward as we hope it might be.

[29 : 28] So trust in Him and serve others. Because there is no power play in His kingdom. Let's pray.

God, would you help us to believe that the kingdom of your Son, Jesus, is not like the kingdoms of this world.

That it is as good as we wish it were. That it is as simple as we hope it might be.

I pray for my brothers and sisters who trust in Jesus. Would you help them to serve, not in order to get ahead, but simply because that's what you've done for us and your Son.

And for those who do not yet believe, I pray that this would be a compelling vision of the kind of world we all want. The kind of world that we will get when Jesus comes again.

[30 : 50] It's in His name that we pray. Amen.