

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 20:24 - 20:28



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg discusses the incident in Matthew 20 where James and John, the sons of Zebedee, along with their mother, ask Jesus for a special privilege above the other apostles. Gregg notes that their request may have been based on their close relationship with Jesus, but it reveals a misguided and offensive attitude towards authority. Jesus cautions against exercising authority in a Gentile manner and suggests that church officers should not operate as secular corporations do. Gregg emphasizes that leadership in the church should be based on gifting and service, rather than imposing oneself on others.

### Transcript

In our last session together, we were looking at Matthew chapter 20 and a story about how two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, who were brothers, brought their mother and approached Jesus and asked that they be given a special privilege above the other apostles. They desired to be given the positions at Jesus' right and left hand in his kingdom. And what that meant, of course, would be that they would be his prime minister and his grand vizier of something, that they would be under him the most authoritative, the most privileged persons in his kingdom.

And he said to them, you don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup I have to drink of and be baptized with the baptism that I shall be baptized with? And he was referring to his sufferings in that question. They didn't know he was referring to that.

And they simply, glibly, without knowing really the meaning of his statement, they said, yeah, we're able to do that. And he said, well, you will indeed drink of the cup that I must drink of and you will be baptized with the baptism that I am to be baptized with. But, you know, as far as the positions at my right and left hand, that is not mine to give.

My father is the one who will decide those kinds of things. And so the disciples, James and John, had done this sort of end run around the other apostles to attempt to get a position in the kingdom that they anticipated would soon be emerging and to really get above the other apostles. Now, why they thought they should deserve this is not told.

It does not say that there are any arguments that they give why they should deserve such a position. But it turns out they were first cousins of Jesus and they thought maybe that some nepotism might come into play here. That, after all, they were the only ones of the twelve that were really that closely related to Jesus.

And therefore, maybe they should secure early on, before there was much actual contest over it, these positions of privilege. At a time when they perhaps thought Jesus would be disposed to give them to them. Anyway, they misapprehended the kingdom of God.

They misapprehended the spirit of Jesus. They were really wrong. He said, you don't know what you're asking.

However, the other disciples knew what they asked. And, of course, they didn't much appreciate it. It says in verse 24, Matthew 20, 24, And when the ten, that is the other ten apostles, other than James and John, heard it, they were moved with indignation against these two brothers.

And I guess they would be. I mean, first of all, the other disciples were just as ambitious as James and John were. And they would have liked just as much to have those positions that James and John were seeking, as they would.

And they thought it was really pretty sneaky of those guys to go and get a special audience with Jesus to ask for that, without letting the others know, to try to get in ahead of them. Now, of course, the other disciples didn't have a good attitude either. I can understand them being somewhat indignant.

Even if I were one of the other disciples, and if I was not interested in pursuing a high position, I would still be somewhat indignant at their attitude. I mean, the very fact that the disciples, James and John, would want to get ahead of the others and make sure that they had positions above the others is just kind of an offensive attitude in general. And so there was some strife, there was some bad blood, some bad feeling among the disciples over this incident.

But Jesus called them to himself and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you. But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.

And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Now, here Jesus teaches something that I think the modern church needs very desperately to understand.

And that is that Christ's kingdom, Christ's fellowship, his family, is to operate on entirely different principles than any man-made organization or any worldly coalition or association of people. He says the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who

are great, that is among the Gentiles in their government, exercise authority over them. Now, think about it.

Those who are in positions of power among the Gentiles in the world exercise authority over the people that they are over. Now, what could be more legitimate than that? Isn't that what authority is for, to be exercised? I mean, if a person is a king, shouldn't he exercise authority over his subjects? Well, Jesus didn't say he shouldn't. He just said that's what they do.

That's how the Gentiles operate. The rulers of the Gentiles rule in the Gentile nations, in the Gentile kingdom. And in the world, that's what authority positions mean.

They mean the privilege of having others serve you. If you are in a position of power in a pagan, worldly organization or government, it generally means that other people serve you. Now, the United States would be a notable exception to the general trend historically because those who formed this country wished to establish a nation that was a government for the people and by the people.

And so that the people themselves are the rulers, and the elected officials are the public servants. That was, to our mind, that's kind of, we're familiar with that, and we take that sort of for granted here in this country. But actually, that was very unusual.

In fact, it was unique in the days when the men who formed the United States had this concept because essentially all nations had kings, and kings ruled over people. People did not rule over themselves and did not appoint their leaders and remove their leaders and so forth by common consent. That was simply not done.

Now, of course, in the past 200 years or so, most nations, it seems to me, have gone the direction of the United States so that we've got constitutional governments in many places around the world and democracies. And so things have really changed, but we have to put ourselves back in the position that things were in the days of Jesus in order to understand what he's saying. He's saying that kings, which every Gentile nation was ruled over by kings, are privileged ones.

They are the lords. They can command, and they can rule, and they can expect others to jump when they speak. I mean, remember the centurion that Jesus had a conversation with in Matthew chapter 8. The man said, I'm a man under authority myself, and I also have authority.

I can say to my servant, go, and he goes, and to this one, come, and do that, and he does it. And what he's saying is that's what authority means in the world, in the Roman army. That authority means that when I say do it, someone has to do it for me.

It means I've got the gravy job. It means I'm the one in charge, and people serve me. Now, in addition to the Roman army, in addition to Gentile nations in general, that's the

way most organizations are, of course, even in this country.

Corporations and organizations of almost all kinds have the people that become the leaders, and the leaders give the orders, and the orders are to be followed, and there is discipline and so forth on those who don't follow the orders. And because of that, those positions of power are often sought and obtained by people who have a desire for the privilege of controlling other people. Now, it is not inevitable that those positions will be held by such people, and while we have heard the saying that power corrupts, I don't know if that's really as accurate as to say positions of power attract corruptible people.

That would perhaps be more correct, that corrupt people who want to control others often seek positions of power and obtain them. It's not necessarily so that a humble person in a position of authority will become corrupted by that authority, but it's simply that you find a great number of corrupt people in positions of authority because that's what corrupt people often desire. They desire to control people.

That is considered to be a privilege. It's a boost to the ego. It allows you to do less work for yourself and have others work for you.

There's a great deal of the carnal man that is pleased to have others at his beck and call and be the one who gives the orders. It makes him feel important. It makes him be able to, as I say, do less work himself.

Those are carnal considerations that people who are corrupt want to exploit by getting positions of power. Jesus said those Gentiles who are in positions of power and who rule over the Gentiles, they exercise authority over them and lord over them. But he said it shall not be so among you.

He means in the church, of course, among the disciples of Jesus. Those who are in positions of authority are not to be those who lord it over the flock. This is so important because Jesus said the one who would be great among you and chief among you must be the servant.

He's obviously trying to take the situation as we are familiar with it in Gentile organizations and turn it on its head. He is not just trying to slightly modify it. He's trying to turn it right upside down.

That is to say, in the Gentile organizations, those in authority are privileged persons who exercise authority over others. But in my kingdom, those who are great do not exercise authority over people. They do not lord it over people at all.

They just serve. And what this suggests is that the church of Jesus Christ is to be entirely of a different character in its whole makeup from any man-made Gentile organization. Now, I'd like to say, I'd like to be able to say that that is so with the church today, but I'm afraid it isn't.

In most cases, it seems to me, the church is organized very much like a Gentile organization. In fact, most of them are corporations with a board of directors of some sort. They might give them other names.

They might call them elders or deacons or something or trustees, but they have a board of directors, as it were. Many times they have a man acting as a CEO. He might be the pastor.

But the point is that the churches are organized just like Gentile organizations. And what's worse, within this organization, they operate and exploit their authority very much the same way as they would if they were a Gentile corporation. Now, many times there are godly men who are pastors and elders and who are leaders in church organizations.

And they, of course, do not desire to be, you know, bossy or controlling, and they want to be servant-like. And they do exercise their office as servants. But the whole structure of the church, even the ones in which these men serve, many times, I think, is different than what Jesus had in mind.

We tend to assume, because we live in an age where the church has always been this way, that is, in our lifetime it has always been, that the men who run the church run it like secular men run secular corporations. And that if people don't do it their way, then they can be, you know, disciplined or whatever. Now, I believe in church discipline, but not because somebody displeases a pastor.

The pastor is not the boss of the church. Peter, who was probably one of the ones who was indignant at James and John on this particular occasion, wrote to the leaders of the churches who were, in the biblical times, they were called elders. And, of course, in many churches today, they're still called elders.

And in 1 Peter 5, verse 1, he said, The elders who are among you I exhort, I, who am also a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed, he tells the elders, shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. Now, he tells the leaders of the church they are not to be lords over the church. They are to be examples.

They're supposed to serve the church by setting an example of what Christianity is supposed to be like. They are not to be those who exercise authority over, because Jesus said, That's what the Gentiles do, and it shall not be so among you. Certainly, there was never a person in the early church, at least among the Gentiles, who had more authority than the apostle Paul.

The apostle Paul was the one who appointed elders in various churches, and because of that, he certainly would be considered to have as much authority as anybody, and more than most, in the first century church. But how did he view his position? He says in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 24, Paul said, Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy. For by faith you stand.

In other words, you by your own faith stand with God. We, the apostle and his companions and others in spiritual positions of leadership, we do not have dominion over your faith. We are simply fellow workers for your joy.

Our labor is to help you to enjoy your faith, to help you have the joy of your salvation. I am laboring, I'm serving, he says. I'm not having dominion over you.

Now, this is a very tricky thing, because it's very hard to have an organization that is organized like a worldly corporation, where the pastor is like a CEO and the elders are like a board of directors or whatever, and have it not operate in just the way that a Gentile organization does. And since most churches are organized that way, many godly pastors don't know quite how to avoid operating the same way as a worldly corporation, because they have their board meetings, and it's just like the board meetings of probably General Motors. The difference is, in the Christian circles, hopefully, the leaders try to get the mind of God and do what God wants.

But in many cases, they begin to see themselves in the same light as just the ones who get to make the decisions and the churches simply to follow. Now, there is a sense in which there's some truth in that, but it's an attitude that is very subtle, just like many things in Christianity. That which is the difference between spirituality and carnality is simply a shade of attitude.

And in this particular case, Jesus tells us that the leaders of the church are not like political rulers. In fact, it must not be so among you. But they are more like slaves, more like servants.

What this really means is that what we call church officers, probably, maybe it's better not to think of them as officers at all. We should call them church servants. They are there to serve.

Now, there are various gifts that God gives to different people to help them serve the church for the church's benefit. There is a gift of teaching. There is a gift of pastoring.

There is a gift of leadership. There is a gift of exhortation. And there are many other gifts besides.

But these are gifts that are given to certain individuals not to privilege them, but to benefit the church, that they can serve the church with these gifts. What often happens is that those who have these gifts, perhaps a person has a gift of leading or has a gift of

teaching, that person often today will decide that because he has a gift of leading, everyone is obligated to follow him. And if they don't, he becomes bossy.

He becomes authoritarian. And in some cases, offended. And sometimes he'll excommunicate people who don't agree with him.

This is not being a servant. You see, leadership is not a privilege. It is just another gift.

It is just another service to provide. There are many services to provide. All pastors appreciate those who have the gift of giving and those who have the gift of helps, for example.

But suppose somebody who had the gift of helps came to the pastor's house and said, Pastor, I've come to wash your windows for you because I have the gift of helps and that's my service to you. And the pastor said, Well, I appreciate that. But my wife just washed the windows yesterday.

We don't need our windows washed. Thank you. And besides, we would like to have a little privacy today in our home.

It's our day off with our family. And the person says, Well, Pastor, I'm sorry, but this is my gift. I have the gift of helps.

And what I do is I wash people's windows, so I'm going to wash your windows. And the pastor said, Well, as I said, we don't need our windows washed. We actually prefer our privacy and our windows are already clean.

But the person keeps imposing himself, says, Pastor, you don't seem to understand. I'm going to wash your windows. That's my gift.

Well, obviously, that would be absurd because a gift is not to be used in such a way as to impose it on people who don't need it or don't desire it. And likewise, the person who has the gift of teaching or the gift of leadership is not given a position where he can impose it on other people. I've known so many pastors who want to micromanage the lives of all the people in their congregation, including people who didn't need that kind of micromanagement.

Now, I understand that a young Christian who doesn't know one thing about walking with God might need close supervision and close intensive discipleship for a while. But when there's older Christians who are walking with God and they're not sinning in there, they know the word of God and they're doing fine. There's no need for leadership to be imposed on them.

They can take their examples where they find them. They can receive teaching from those that they choose to receive teaching from. And that is what Jesus said about

shepherding.

He said a good shepherd, if he has 100 sheep and one wanders off, he leaves the 99 and goes after the one who's wandering. What that means is a good shepherd can recognize the difference between low maintenance sheep and high maintenance sheep. And the shepherd's efforts are concentrated on those who are the high maintenance sheep.

He can let the low maintenance sheep graze without his supervision. They don't need to be babysat so thoroughly because they are where they belong. And there are many Christians who don't need to have the pastor's opinions and agendas imposed on them.

They are serving God just fine. But many times there are Christian leaders in churches who feel that their position is like that of a ruler of the Gentiles who is to be obeyed. He's supposed to exercise authority over them.

The Bible does not say this. It's true in Hebrews chapter 13 it does say obey those who have the rule over you. But actually in the Greek it says obey those who lead you.

And it says those who have spoken the word of God to you. You obey the word of God that they speak. You don't obey them because they have inherent authority.

No man has inherent authority over you. Jesus does. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:3 the head of every man is Christ.

Not the head of every man is his pastor or his elders. And so Jesus taught this very plainly. Unfortunately many in the modern church have not understood it or have neglected it.

And the church has suffered a great deal from people who like James and John wanted positions of power and privilege over other Christians. A spirit totally unlike Jesus. Jesus said you need to be just like the son of man meaning himself.

As he did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many. Jesus died for other people. He did not come so that he could lord it over other people.

Although he does serve as our lord because we are like sheep going astray and need a shepherd. And he offers himself to us in that capacity.