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Matthew 20:17 - 20:23



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 20:17-23, where Jesus tells his disciples that whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Jesus refused the request of the mother of James and John to be seated at his right and left hands as it was not his decision to make. Jesus also reminded his followers that positions of honor are not important in his kingdom but rather the willingness to take up one's cross and follow him. Gregg emphasizes that disciples should not be concerned about who is going to be in positions of authority, but rather should focus on serving others like Jesus.

Transcript

We'll resume our study in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 20, beginning at verse 17. Now, this is actually the third time that Jesus has spelled this out to his disciples, but it's much closer to the actual time of fulfillment than the other two times. Sometime earlier, probably months earlier, Jesus had been at Caesarea Philippi, and that was the occasion when he had said to them, Who do men say that I am? And he'd received a variety of answers.

And then he said, Well, who do you say that I am? And his disciples, Peter speaking for them, said, You're the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus was glad to hear that Peter understood this because there had been some setbacks in terms of Jesus' popularity recently. The 5,000 had ceased to follow him because he had spoken of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, and he'd experienced a sudden deflation in his popularity.

And yet the disciples he found were still believers. They still believed he was the Christ. And he said, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father which is in heaven.

And then he went on a little later, a few sentences later, and began to tell the disciples that he would die after being turned over to the chief priests in Jerusalem, and he would rise again the third day. Now, that was the first time he told them that directly, was at Caesarea Philippi. And a short time later, he was on the Mount of Transfiguration, and

coming down from the mountain, he told them again the same information.

The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, the chief priests are going to kill him, crucify him, and on the third day he'll rise again. Now, we are told specifically in the Scriptures that on that second occasion where Jesus made that prediction, his disciples discussed among themselves what he could possibly mean by rising from the dead. They didn't know if he was speaking literally or non-literally, and they just didn't quite get the picture.

And now, much closer to the actual event, we have Jesus telling them again. So, no one can claim that Jesus didn't warn them that what was coming. He says, behold, we're going to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to mock and discourage and to crucify.

And the third day he will rise again. Now, they didn't quite understand that. Even after Jesus died, they did not understand until his resurrection what he was predicting.

Apparently, they were just on a different wavelength. They just weren't in a position to really have that information stick in their minds and understand what he was talking about. Not that it was difficult, not that it was obscure, but some people just hear what they want to hear, and they screen out things they don't want to hear.

And they certainly didn't want to hear that he was going to be crucified. And so, they probably screened out everything he said at that point, and didn't even hear when he said, and rise again the third day. Ironically, in verse 20, it says, Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to him with her sons kneeling down and asking something from him.

And he said to her, What do you wish? And she said to him, Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, in your kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am able to drink, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They said to him, We are able.

So he said to them, You will indeed drink my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with, but to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give. But it is for those for whom it is prepared by my Father. And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brothers.

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. Well, this is really an amazing thing, because Jesus was speaking to them about his death, his impending death.

Now, we know they didn't catch it, and they didn't understand it, but it's amazing to find in this immediate context, two of his disciples coming and asking to have positions of prominence in his kingdom. I mean, even if they understood, which they did not, that his death would be followed by a resurrection and an exaltation, and that Jesus would sit on the throne at his Father's right hand and so forth in his kingdom, even if they understood that, and it was that throne they were seeking positions next to, it seems highly insensitive in the immediate context of Jesus talking about himself being scourged and rejected and mocked and dying for them to say, oh, by the way, can we sit in the positions of privilege at your right hand and your left? And that's, of course, what they mean when they talk about sitting at the right hand and the left. Now, you might say, well, Steve, the brothers didn't come to Jesus.

It says here their mother did. Well, it says that their mother came along with her sons, and they knelt down and asked Jesus something, and he said, what do you want? And she said, grant that these two sons of mine may sit one on your right hand and the other on your left in your kingdom. Now, this story is also told in Mark chapter 10, verses 35 through 45, and there it does not mention the mother.

It just mentions that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came and made this request. Matthew simply gives us more detail. They did not come alone.

They brought their mother, and they allowed their mother to speak on their behalf. This is not really very much different than what we read in the book of Exodus, how that we read Moses confronted Pharaoh and Moses said this and Moses said that and so forth, where in fact we know from other passages that it was Aaron who spoke on his behalf. Aaron and Moses together went to Pharaoh, and although Aaron was the spokesman, he was the spokesman for Moses, and therefore the narrative reads that Moses said such and such.

Now, it's not that he said it with his own mouth, but through his spokesman. Likewise, these brothers came and requested something. They didn't do it with their own mouth.

They did it through a spokesperson, their mother. And why would they choose her? Well, as a matter of fact, if you compare the various statements in the other Gospels, you'll find that the mother of these two brothers was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Now, to put that a little neater, it simply means that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were the first cousins of Jesus, and that their mother, Salome, was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

So, Salome was Jesus' own aunt. And that may or may not have had any bearing on the

disciples' choice to have their mother come, but it seems that they may have felt that Jesus would be more inclined to grant a request from his mother's sister than simply the disciples coming on their own behalf. Now, she's coming and says, grant these sons these positions.

Now, she doesn't give any reason why he should. She doesn't say, well, you know, my sons, they're better than these other disciples. They very clearly are less foolish.

They're less impetuous. They're not like this Peter who's always flying off half-cocked. They're more gifted than some of these other guys.

Therefore, I really think you'd do well to have them at the right and left hand in your kingdom. I think they're the most competent in your band. Now, she didn't make any kind of argument like that.

She just asked that position for them. And it seems as if she thought the very asking of it might be grounds for Jesus granting it, as if maybe there was some family privilege there, some nepotism that Jesus should practice here. In any case, Jesus did not grant it to them.

He did not rebuke them harshly, interestingly enough, even though the attitude of these brothers in sending their mother like this to speak and make this request was way out of line, as he points out gently. He doesn't really address it as the sin of pride and egotism that it is until the other disciples complain about it. But before that happens, Jesus, perhaps speaking gently for the sake of his mother's sister who is there making the request, Jesus answered and said, you don't know what you're asking.

To sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in the kingdom, you don't know really what you're asking for one reason, because you don't know what the kingdom is. You see, they thought that the kingdom was going to be a political kind of a kingdom with political honors to be given to the favorites. You know, that's what happens in earthly kingdoms.

Now, a few verses later, Jesus very distinctly says, that's how the rulers of the Gentiles do these things. But it shall not be so among you. He wants to make it clear to his disciples that his kingdom is not going to operate on the same principles of authority and privilege as the kingdoms of the Gentiles do.

But they didn't understand that because they thought the kingdom of God under the Messiah would be very much like the kingdom of Israel under David. There was much reason to believe this because much of the prophecy about the king and his Messiah, the Messiah and his kingdom, many of the words in the Old Testament prophets about this subject were cast in language reminiscent of David and his kingdom. The Gentiles will serve him and so forth.

The Jews will be prominent. And so the disciples along with most Jewish people hoped

that when the Messiah's kingdom would come, that it would mean the Jewish people would be prominent over Gentile people. And that they would have a kingdom that was very much like any other kingdom where there would be a king and his cabinet and his staff and his privileged few and so forth, the inner circle.

And this is what the disciples were hoping for. They were hoping for positions of authority and power and privilege in the kingdom they hoped would be soon emerging. And that's why Jesus said, you don't know what you're asking.

First of all, the kingdom we're talking about doesn't have the kind of privileges attached that you are craving. It has privileges and that is for sure. But they're of a different sort.

They are not the privilege of being able to rule over people. That's not what the kingdom of God offers to those who are its favorites, if there are favorites. It does not offer them the privilege of ruling over people, but of serving people.

This is a kingdom of a spiritual sort. And the best kind of leadership is servanthood. Now, he gets into this a little later here in the same passage, but he's saying, you're misunderstanding what I'm talking about when I talk about my kingdom.

And what you're asking for is something that you don't know what it really involves. As a matter of fact, to be great in the kingdom is going to require dying to yourself. It's going to require eating, I should say, drinking the cup that I have to drink and being baptized with the baptism that I have to be baptized with.

Now, this reference to being baptized with the baptism that Jesus must be baptized with is an unusual reference because the word baptism means to be immersed. That's what the Greek word baptizo means is immersion or submersion or being overwhelmed in liquid and water or something like that. And thus the Bible speaks about John baptizing people in the river and Jesus baptizing and the apostles baptizing and so forth.

And this always, well, not always, but many times refers to immersion in water. There are other baptisms referred to there's reference to being baptized in the Holy Spirit and in fire. These are other immersions of another sort, not a physical sort, but they are nonetheless ways in which the word baptism is used.

In this connection, Jesus is talking about his sufferings and the baptism that he must be baptized with means he's going to be overwhelmed. He's going to be immersed in suffering, in pain. And he says, then you want positions analogous to my own, second only to my own in my kingdom.

And yet, are you able to pay the price to get there? Are you able to be baptized with this baptism that I am baptized with and to drink of the cup that I must drink of this cup? Jesus also referred to, of course, in the Garden of Gethsemane. You'll recall when he prayed there, he said, Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken from me. Let this cup

pass from me.

And when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus and Peter drew his sword in order to defend Jesus, Jesus said, Peter, put away your sword, the cup that my father has given me. Shall I not drink it? In other words, the cup of suffering and of death. Now, he said, this is what I have to drink.

Are you willing to drink this too? Are you able to do so? Are you able to have this baptism and to drink this cup? Now, the disciples had no idea what he was talking about. And so they simply said, sure, we're able. Why not? You name it, we'll do it.

And they said so glibly because, of course, they didn't fully understand at all what Jesus was going to go through and much less what they were going to go through. And it's not clear whether they would have been so eager had they known. But they nonetheless figured, well, you know, whatever it takes, you know, yeah, we'll do that, whatever.

We're able. And he said to them, you will indeed drink my cup and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with. But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give.

But it is for those for whom it is prepared by my father. So Jesus indicates, OK, I'm glad you said you're able to be baptized with this baptism and drink this cup because you're going to have to do that. However, I can't really can't really offer you the positions that you're requesting because they are not mine to give.

I myself am under my father's authority doing his will. And he also has prepared those positions for whoever he will. Now, it's interesting that Jesus words do suggest that perhaps there will be positions of this sort at his right hand and his left hand.

Maybe there are such positions available. He does not say who will possess them, nor does he indicate that Christians ought to be concerned about who will possess them. We should not be ambitious for special authority or privilege in the kingdom, because that's the wrong spirit.

That's different than Christ's own spirit. He was not jealous over his authority. He came to serve and not to be served.

So anyway, there may be a time when we will discover two persons who actually sit at the right and the left hand of Jesus. But he didn't say who they would be, and he didn't even necessarily say he knew who they would be. He said that whatever those positions were, that was the father's prerogative to give.

And even though he might wish to give them to someone, that would not be within his realm of authority to do. So they're asking the wrong person. They're asking Jesus for privilege that he isn't even in a position to confer.

But he said, since the subject has come up, you will indeed have to drink the cup I drink of and be baptized with the baptism that I'm baptized with. Now, James, one of these two men, in fact, was the first of the apostles to die a martyr. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was not an apostle.

But of the twelve apostles, the first to die a martyr was James. In Acts chapter 12, we read that Herod beheaded James. So James certainly drank that cup that Jesus drank from.

And as far as the baptism of suffering, John, as far as we know, did not die a martyr, but he did suffer. We read in Acts chapters 4 and 5 that he, along with Peter, was imprisoned and beaten for his testimony. And that probably does not exhaust the amount of suffering he went through.

There is a tradition that he was at one time dipped in burning oil or boiling oil to be killed. That was a baptism, wasn't it? But actually, according to the tradition, he was spared supernaturally. He was not hurt by this immersion in boiling oil, and therefore he was banished to the island of Patmos, where he had the visions that became the book of Revelation.

That is the same John. So these men did experience sufferings, but we do not have any reason to believe that they are currently at the right and left hand of Jesus, since Jesus himself said he couldn't promise that, and more importantly, you shouldn't be concerned about it. It is a wrong-headedness on the part of the disciples that makes them want special privilege in his kingdom above others.

You know, it is the spirit of Christianity to wish good things on others, not on oneself principally, especially in a situation where for you to have privilege would be depriving others of it. If there were indeed just two positions, a seat at the right and a seat at the left hand of Jesus, that would mean that whoever occupied those seats did so at the expense of the others, because there are only two seats. And therefore, to desire those two seats is to desire that others not have them.

It is a little different if you are desiring a privilege or some benefit that everybody could have, and that your desiring of it does not in any sense put you above others, but they were desiring a position that would put them above others. And this is certainly not the kind of spirit that Jesus desired to encourage in his disciples. Even earlier on in chapter 18 and verse 1, at that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Similar kind of concern.

And Jesus called a little child to him and set him in the midst of them and said, assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Now, here we have the disciples on more

than one occasion concerned about their own greatness, their own status.

And Jesus discourages this attitude. And what is amazing to me is how gently he does so. To my mind, the attitude should have called forth fairly strong rebuke from him.

But we have to be careful about how we judge these men, because we have been instructed by Jesus in these areas and the rest of the New Testament in ways that they had not fully. They were still pretty much products of their age, and we are more products of a Christian age, or at least of a time where Christian revelation about the need for humility and service and surrendering our position for others, those kinds of teachings have really permeated our culture because of the Bible's influence upon our culture. And therefore, we are less excusable if we would have such attitudes as they had.

They were really just beginners in Christianity, and they were very, very ignorant of the kind of spirit that Jesus was calling his disciples to have. These same two men on another occasion in the Gospel of Luke asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven on certain cities that refused to show hospitality to Jesus and the apostles. They said, Lord, should we call down fire from heaven on them like Elijah did? And Jesus said, you do not know what manner of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.

These people, the sons of thunder, James and John, often were a little bit like Peter in jumping to conclusions and especially in misapprehending the kind of person Jesus was and the kind of persons he was calling them to be and the kind of kingdom that he was bringing in. Next time, we'll take a look at his answer to them a little more closely because it is very important that we not miss this lesson. It has been missed too much by the modern church.