

January 13, 2019

“The Path of Service”
Matthew 20:20-28

FCF: Ours slowness to serve

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus walked the path of service.
(magnet) As His followers, so too must we.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

If we are honest and the story was to be told, we have to admit we are slow to serve on most occasions. Think back to your recent holiday gatherings. The meal was over. Bellies were filled. Conversation was flowing. And piles of dishes were looming and trash was overflowing. Everyone assumes it must be someone else’s job. Then the dog goes to the door so you say, “Oh well. Gotta let her out.” This is all hypothetical. We have to admit we are often slow to serve.

This is true at home, school, work, and the church. Oh, we might serve out of duty, habit, or obligation. But rarely with gladness of heart. What might we learn of this from Jesus?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 20:20-28](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

A quote worth considering from Yale historian Jeroslav Pelikan ([READ quote](#)):

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost 20 centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?

As it turns out, little if any at all would be left. Just from a societal standpoint, consider these six areas of impact left by Jesus on this world. Education - the great universities of the West began out of a desire to love God with the mind. Children - Jesus’ treatment of the young as persons led to such things as orphanages and godparents. Humanitarian reform - from the start, the early church championed those that society excluded. Compassion - Jesus’ love for the suffering led to the creation of hospitals, the world’s first voluntary, charitable institutions. Forgiveness - in the ancient world, virtue meant rewarding your friends and crushing your enemies. Not so with Jesus. And, finally, humility - the ancient world certainly honored such virtues as courage and wisdom. But not humility. And Jesus came as the God who condescends, who stoops to serve.

Which takes us to our text. Last week, we looked at Jesus’ foretelling of His death. That leads to where we are today - a request, a dialogue, and a command. Jesus has made clear that He has come to die. Now we see not just what He has come to do but why. His death is not just a tragic injustice but a vicarious sacrifice. And it demands a response. Put another way, Jesus quite clearly walked the path of service. As His followers, so too must we. So too must we.

What would that look like? Three things are certain. First, such service is in contrast to the world. Second, it is for the sake of others. And, third, it is done all because of Jesus.

I. IN CONTRAST TO THE WORLD

First, such service stands in utter contrast to the world. It is living in a whole other way.

A) A Clear Statement

Look at the clear statement Jesus gives to us here (**READ Matthew 20:25-26a**).

1. Reminder given

This is a strong reminder - not so much a criticism as an observation. So often in so many arenas, a leader's whims are fulfilled by those they lead. We know that. That's just the way it is.

2. Declaration made

Jesus says, "Not so with you. Not so in my kingdom among my people." You are not to be jockeying for status, standing, or prized positions on the organizational chart. Not so with you.

B) The Obvious Need

Why does He have to say this? Because of our heart's need (**READ Matthew 20:20-24**).

1. A mother and her sons

Who is this? Pulling various passages together, this is Salome, the sister of Jesus' mother, Mary. Which makes her Jesus' aunt and her sons, James and John, Jesus' cousins. What do they want? They've honed in on mention of a kingdom and thrones. And they want prestige and power.

2. The other ten

The other ten are indignant - jealous and upset. Perhaps feeling that these two were trying to use family ties to gain positions they themselves wanted. All was not right on the road to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Jesus has just predicted His crucifixion. And His followers are jockeying for position. They needed this reminder that the path of service stands in contrast to the world.

Application:

We are fighting a great undertow all around and within us. We naturally want respect. A desire for honor can be healthy. As can a striving to do our best. But all that can turn so sour.

As followers of Jesus, we are not to be living for the respect and honor of others. We are not to be obsessed with making our mark or imposing our will. Again, "not so with you."

Jesus walked the path of service. So too must we. In contrast to the world.

II. FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS

What shape should this service take? (**READ Matthew 20:26-27**) We are to live not for the sake of ourselves but others. For in this kingdom, greatness is measured in terms of service.

A) Seemingly Foolish

1. To anyone listening

This may seem foolish. How would this have been heard? In the ancient world, humility was not a virtue but a vice. Jesus flips the master-slave roles. This was radical even for Jewish ears.

2. An upside-down kingdom

But His is an upside-down kingdom. Think with me. The rich are poor and the poor rich. The first are last and the last first. He turns us inside-out and everything around us upside-down.

B) But Deeply Wise

It may seem foolish. But it is deeply wise. Let's think this through for a moment.

1. According to our design

It's according to our design. We are made in the image of a God who serves. That's significant.

2. The reality of deception

As is the reality of deception. Be careful what you ask for. With power comes responsibility. To have position means hard decisions. To be at the center of attention is exactly that. Be careful.

This is the reason for Jesus' direction - the design and deception. Wherever you are, you are there to serve. That is true greatness. It is measured only by service, living for others' sake.

Application:

Wherever you are - work or school, home or church - you are there to serve. But let's be clear on what that means. To be a servant is not to be servile, stupid, ignorant, or nice. Those are all caricatures. Jesus is certainly none of those things. To serve takes a heart of deep strength.

To be a servant or a slave in the way Jesus speaks is to live in such a way that filters everything through this grid - utter self-denial for the sake of others. Especially for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Utter self-denial for the sake of others. Which again takes deep strength.

Jesus walked the path of service. So too must we, living for the sake of others.

III. ALL BECAUSE OF JESUS

Where are we? First, such service is in contrast to the world. Second, it is for the sake of others. And, third, it is all because of Jesus. ([READ Matthew 20:26-28](#)) This is in two parts.

A) His Unique and Finished Work

Starting with Jesus' unique and finished work, the cup He alone would and could drink.

1. The imagery

Consider the imagery Jesus uses here. The Son of Man "came" - implying His preexistence. He came as a "ransom" - the price of release, often used of slaves. And He did so "for many" - that is, "in the place of" or "for the sake of" others, as a substitute on their behalf or in their stead.

2. The necessity

Those are the images Jesus uses. All of which has a tone of necessity to it. Meaning it had to be this way because of our inability as slaves. And it had to be this way for the sake of both His love and justice. But now we are free. Yet not absolutely free for we now have a new Master.

There's so much here. But here's the main thing. Such love, truly known, changes us.

Illustration:

Think of Lily Potter, the mother of Harry Potter. In the first book, Lord Voldemort tries to kill Harry but he can't touch him. When the Voldemort-possessed villain tries to lay hands on Harry, he is racked with agonizing pain and thwarted from his plan. Harry later asks his mentor, Professor Dumbledore, "Why couldn't he touch me?" Dumbledore replies ([READ quote](#)):

Your mother died to save you...love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...(but) to have been loved so deeply...will give us some protection forever.

That's a signpost to Jesus' unique and finished work. It cannot be known and embraced without leaving a mark, without having an effect upon our hearts, impelling us upon a path of service.

B) His Perpetual Pattern

But there's something else, what we could call His perpetual pattern. Yes, there is the cup He alone could drink. But Jesus also speaks of a cup we must be willing to drink ourselves.

1. Our sharing with His sufferings

The sharing of His suffering. That is, suffering in His name, for His sake, because we are one with Him. You hear that in Jesus' words to James and John. James would be the first of the disciples to be martyred. John, decades later, would be the last, exiled on the island of Patmos.

2. The imitation of Christ

There is a pattern to our service. We are to share in the sufferings of Christ. And to live in imitation of Him. It's quite clear - "even as" or "just as." Followers of Christ are to be just that.

We are to live as servants and slaves of all all because of Jesus. With our eyes set upon both His unique and finished work as well as His perpetual pattern. Service all because of Him.

Application:

This is service that is untainted by doing so chiefly because of a joy it somehow brings to us. What's the problem with that? It's a "self-referential trap" that's ultimately about serving ourselves. This is service only to Jesus, only in the power of Jesus, and only because of Jesus.

And in such service, our hearts are changed. We find a growing humility as we rely upon Him. We come to know freedom from anxiety as we learn to let things go. We begin to know a strange combination of both delightful levity and brutal honesty. How? All because of Jesus.

Jesus walked the path of service. So too are we - all because of Him.

CONCLUSION:

This is captured in a scene from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Fellowship of the Ring* at the Council of Elrond, the leaders of the different races have gathered to decide what to do with the Ring of Power - specifically, how to destroy it before the Dark Lord Sauron finds it. The fate of the world hangs on their decision. Elrond reminds them ([READ quote](#)):

The ring was made in the fires of Mount Doom. Only there can it be unmade. It must be taken deep into Mordor and cast back into the fiery chasm from which it came. One of you must do this.

But Boromir cannot see how this is possible and strongly objects ([READ quote](#)):

One does not simply walk into Mordor. Its black gates are guarded by more than just orcs. There is evil there that does not sleep, and the great eye is ever watchful. It is a barren wasteland, riddled with fire and ash and dust. Not with ten thousand men could you do this. It is folly!

The council erupts into protests and bickering until a small voice is heard that silences them all. Frodo the hobbit, the smallest and weakest of them all, stands and boldly says ([READ quote](#)):

I will take it. I will take it! I will take the ring to Mordor. Though I do not know the way.

The council members are stunned into silence. And one by one pledge themselves to the effort.

It's a compelling scene. Frodo's words pull not just upon the hearts of the characters in the story but ours as well. Why? It touches something deep. We know it's true. It's not just the writing or the cinematography. It's because it's true, real, tapping into the very thing that Jesus is saying here and for which we were made. For which we were made and are being remade.

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