

Kingdom Leadership

Matthew 20:17-34

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Introduction

We still have a tendency in our culture to think of leadership with a “superhero” mindset. That has changed quite a bit in the business leadership literature with the newer model being one more of coach and collaborator. However, think about the TV heroes of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s where we often have the lone, singular figure who comes and saves the day. But frequently in Christian and church settings we fall back on the older way of thinking. We expect our pastor or ministry leader to be “in charge”. We want them to have all the answers to our administrative, theological, family, and personal problems. We anticipate that they have faced each possible concern and have experience, expertise, and excellence in how to handle life. That then spills over onto those leading. They often will slowly build a persona that demonstrates a cool, calm exterior. Leaders will have an expectation as well that since they are supposed to have all the answers, those “following” them should just sit and listen to what their decisions, plans and directions are. This frequently grows into an attitude that assumes a sense of privilege and position. This next section of Matthew illustrates both an incorrect interpretation of kingdom life and leadership, and a simple presentation of the premises that keep that improper approach in check.

Matthew as an author exhibits a clear literary artistry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to present, not merely a life of Christ, but an interpretation of Jesus and his work that has application to his original intended audience and by extension all his subsequent readers (including us). With our passage today, we are concluding a smaller subsection that begin in chapter 19 which is in a larger unit that effectively began in verse 21 of chapter 16. There Jesus announced that they are on their way to Jerusalem for a solemn and sacred purpose. In the Gospel of Matthew this is the only trip to Jerusalem, although the Gospel of John indicates at least 3 or 4 visits to Jerusalem. In this section of the Gospel, we have been reading events and teaching that have elaborated principally on internal conflicts that will be present among those in the kingdom and affect their direction and purpose. Earlier Matthew presented the inevitable conflict with those on the outside of the kingdom and here we have that balanced with discussions concerning internal strife. Later we will see that the “outsiders” will finally think they win in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus himself. But we know where we are going and how the story ends with the upside-down victory that is the basis for the, as Russ puts it, the down-side up kingdom life.

One other point to make before we look closer at the passage, I think it will be helpful to see the Old Testament allusion that comes to light here. Jesus has conflated two concepts and Matthew is bringing them out as he arranges and portrays the events. The first is found in the Book of Daniel in chapter 7. Let’s take the time to read some of this to be acquainted with it firsthand. Let’s read beginning from verse 1 to verse 3.

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

He goes on to describe the beasts and their actions. Then his vision changes in verses 9 and 10.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

And after there seems to be a judgment, a further development occurs beginning in verse 13.

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Daniel then elaborates on the interpretation of this vision. In verse 15 and following we read:

"As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. 'These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹ut the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.'

This section then concludes in verses 27 and 28 with these words:

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.' "Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart."

Jesus reference to Son of Man and this kingdom goes back to this section. Son of Man can be a reference that one is a mere mortal, but Jesus' contexts seem to allude that he wants a more complete understanding. But also note the fact that the Son of Man's dominion is inherited by "the saints."

But Jesus includes ideas from Isaiah as well and Matthew makes a point to highlight them. Remember, part of Matthew's purpose is to show how Jesus fulfills Scripture and therefore

how we are to read Scripture as well, the Old Testament in particular. From just Isaiah 52 we can find these words which extend on to more familiar passages in chapter 53. But let's again see the text firsthand reading from verse 7 to 10 in chapter 52 of Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

But as we continue to read in verse 13 and on through the next chapters, we see a picture of this delivering "servant" who is the agent of this kingdom's presence.

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind— so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

And indeed, into chapter 53 we learn "he was wounded for our transgressions." It is important to keep the OT allusions live as we read today's text.

A Momentous Revelation

Let's turn now to our text at hand, chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel beginning now in verse 17. There we find Jesus, still on his way to Jerusalem. He is going intentionally and even though he has announced his coming death, it is not clear that his entourage completely understands what is about to happen when they arrive in Jerusalem. Let us read verses 17-19.

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ "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 ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

Matthew tells us that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, and he takes the twelve aside from among the larger crowd that is with them. And he makes a more clear and stunningly momentous revelation. One that they have heard before. From today's text, I want to point out three particular things that Matthew records Jesus saying.

First, he lets them know they are going to Jerusalem together. It is not just himself that will be facing the divinely planned events. They are engaged together as they face what we now understand is the central event of all of Scripture, of all of history. They will witness, and then

participate on the other side, the intrusion of this new era in redemptive history. They are going to be important in the working out of God's plan. We already know they will have some role in judging Israel and if we "cheat" and think about the end of the book, we know they have some "commission-thing" they are to be engaged with. Indeed, don't miss, "we are going up to Jerusalem."

Then notice that he informs them that "the Son of Man." Stop right there. Who is this "son of man?" Well, we know that Jesus refers to himself predominantly with this phrase. But in Daniel 7 we should note that this is the one whom receives the kingdom. We read that: *"And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."* I am sure that by now the disciples have got this part down. This Jesus that they have been following is the one that fills and fulfills this role. That is the triumphant, exciting part.

But then we read that Jesus puts two ideas together in an unusual and unexpected way. This Son of Man (Daniel 7) will be: *"delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."* Jesus merges Daniel 7 with Isaiah 52 and 53. The reason that the Son of Man is given the kingdom, is because he will die in this terrible way.

That part I think Matthew is suggesting that the disciples are still coming to grips with understanding. All the pieces are there, but they still are struggling. Why do I suggest this? It is because Matthew follows this "passion prediction" with the next vignette.

A Misguided Request

In the section from verse 20 to verse 28 we read this:

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹ And 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." ²² 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Whether James and John's mother overheard the immediately preceding statement or not, she had likely been hearing of the coming of the kingdom and the role the twelve would play in its establishment. She comes to Jesus and brings a misguided request. Because she is his aunt (Mary's sister) she asks that "family privilege" be a part of this leadership scheme. Shouldn't his human cousins sit on his right and left sides? After all, they already seem to participate as some sort of inner circle of disciples with Peter.

And don't let James and John off the hook for something their mother says, let's look at some elements of Jesus response. First, in verse 22 Jesus says, "*You do not know what you are asking.*" This "you" is in the plural. He is not talking now to their mother but to them. They indeed were asking but behind their mother.

Second, he challenges them as to whether they really know what they are asking to do. To drink someone's cup is to do what they do, to follow in their footsteps. Matthew told us what Jesus said to all of them about what their trip to Jerusalem was to entail for him (Jesus). They, rather matter-of-factly state "*we are able.*" It is not likely they really knew what they were saying, but Jesus affirms that in some sense they two will follow him to death as well.

But then, he must deal with the rest of the disciples. They were likely upset that James and John have beat them to the table for negotiations. Probably not because they were bothered by James and John's obvious lack of kingdom humility. Jesus then goes on to inform them that leadership in the kingdom looks like the work of a slave. It is serving and servitude. It is humble and humiliating.

But lastly, he ties it to his previous statement and Matthew highlights it. The Son of Man, that Daniel 7 figure will *give his life as a ransom* to liberate his kingdom followers (the Isaiah servant). So, leading in the kingdom is following Jesus as a servant and slave, even to die to oneself for the advancement of others.

A Majestic Response

Now we could stop here and have a great conclusion, but this next paragraph is connected to this and the larger section because chapter 21 makes a subtle thematic advancement. So, we are forced to read this next section and figure out how it fits in. Let's read on from verse 29 to the end of the chapter, verse 34.

²⁹And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. ³⁰And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³²And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." ³⁴And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

Just before they arrive in Jerusalem, near Jericho, we have a large crowd with Jesus, and we encounter two blind men. Matthew has included a healing event of two blind men previously in this account and here is another. Don't we already know that Jesus has the power to heal even blindness? At least in my flock and maybe up here I have said that the primary purpose of the miracles and the gospel writer's use of the miracle events is not to show that Jesus "can." They do accomplish that. But they are presented as something more, they are arranged to show some truth about Jesus work that is illustrated there. Let's notice a few things about this healing.

First, the blind men are calling out to Jesus as the Son of David. Matthew has already used the son of David idea, but we are not to forget how the book began. The genealogy was all about this Son of David thing. He is not just a healer, but the coming king, the royal heir. But what do they ask? Do they ask for a position of prominence or importance in the coming kingdom? They recognize him as king and ask for mere mercy, mercy to see. Understand "see" as to see with faith, to see to obey, to see to love.

Jesus grants their request, and they know exactly what to do now that they can "see." They follow him. Follow him "to Jerusalem." Follow him perhaps to drink his cup. Follow him as a slave, a servant. Matthew wants us to clearly see, to lead and serve in the kingdom, we must have Jesus himself open our eyes, let us see and understand, and then follow him as servant to die to ourselves for others.

Response

I think that a good way to understand these ideas is to think of Matthew as relating his memory of he and his companions' clear confusion about what this new covenant, kingdom life was supposed to look like. Like Pastor Jason said last week, the disciples had many questions that they asked Jesus especially in this second half of the Gospel.

So, we must come to grips with the "last" - the lowly, meek, child-like and outcast as being "first" - that is, important, valuable, even essential to the kingdom mission and life. This is hard. This is not the culture we live in, even if some of the business/organization literature seems to promote this message. The "hero" still exists for most.

This has application way beyond looking at Kingdom leadership, doesn't it? Yes, leaders are to exemplify Christ's love, compassion, servanthood, and humility, but we are all called to that same depiction. We can and often do think of the Christian life in terms of status, privilege, and accomplishment. We need to recognize we need each other, warts, weaknesses, and all because none of us are deserving of God's grace, blessing or favor. When we truly understand the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ for lost, unlovely, even loathsome sinners (of which we all without exception are), it changes our perspective on rights, privileges, expectations, and position.

Will we trust the gospel, trust Jesus the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Man, to open our eyes to see and follow?