

# Jesus Receives the Ones Who Serve

Matthew 20:17-28

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## **Introduction:**

As we have had a long break in our sermon series from Matthew's Gospel,

- I want to remind you where we are.
  - As we come into chapter 20, Jesus is making His way toward Jerusalem for the very last time—for this time, He will be crucified.
    - As He goes along, He has been showing His disciples about some of the kinds of people He receives and blesses in His kingdom...
      - The disciples have often been surprised.
        1. In Matthew 19:13-15, Jesus showed the disciples that He receives little children who are brought to Him by their parents to be blessed.
          - The disciples had tried to stop the parents,
            - perhaps supposing that Jesus would not be interested in blessing those that were so young that they had to be brought to Him,
            - but Jesus commands them to let the little children come and to forgive them not because of such is the kingdom of heaven.
        2. Then in Matthew 19:16-30, the disciples are again surprised—this time by Jesus' rejection of a very upright, successful young ruler who comes seeking salvation...
          - Jesus is not so impressed with this man who claimed to have kept God's commandments from his youth, but sends him away to ponder his covetousness.
        3. And from this, Jesus then teaches His disciples in Matthew 20:1-16, that in His kingdom many who are first will be last, and the last first...
          - The idea is that those who think they are worthy of His favour will be disappointed;
            - while those who know their unworthiness will be amazed at His generous rewards.
- This brings us up to today's text which is found in Matthew 20:17-28.
  - Here Jesus identifies who the truly great ones are in His kingdom.
  - We will see that His disciples were completely mistaken about what makes a person great...

- For them, greatness was about being in the place where everyone serves you...
  - But for Jesus, greatness is about being in the place where you serve everyone else.
- As we look at this passage today,
    - I urge you to consider your own attitude about greatness.
    - There are two great errors that are made when it comes to the pursuit of greatness in God's kingdom...
      1. The first is to pursue the wrong kind of greatness, greatness according to the world...
      2. The second is to fail to pursue greatness in the kingdom at all—to be lukewarm and suppose it is not worth pursuing or to give up because it seems impossible to attain.
  - Matthew 20:17-28 can help you deal with both of these errors...
    - Open your heart to hear what the Spirit says to you in this passage...

TRANS> To begin this morning, I call you to:

### **I. Admire the greatness of Jesus Christ revealed in His service!**

- A. In this passage, Jesus presents Himself as the chief pattern of greatness in the kingdom...
  1. After speaking to His disciples about what greatness is and is not,
    - He concludes with these words...
      - “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 by to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”
    - Now you know that Jesus almost always refers to Himself as the Son of Man...
      - And so here when He says,
        - “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...”
        - He is presenting Himself as the example of greatness to be imitated by all who belong to His kingdom...
          - And that greatness is found in the fact that He came to serve rather than to be served.

2. Brothers and sisters, you need to so admire Him and His service that you yearn to serve as He served, to love as He loved!
    - a. You are to look at His example and see how beautiful it is and say,
      - “I want to be like that!”
    - b. The example of Jesus’ is clearly what drove Paul to give and give and give of himself for others...
      - 1) Some people thought Paul was crazy,
        - the way he so willing suffered everything from poverty to persecution in order to get the gospel to others...
      - 2) But he explains himself in 2 Cor 5:13-15...
        - He says:
          - 2 Cor 5:13-15: “For if we are beside ourselves, *it is* for God; or if we are of sound mind, *it is* for you. For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”
        - When Paul saw how marvelous the love of his Saviour was—
          - so great that He was willing to come from heaven and die on the cross to redeem us—
            - he found that that love **compelled** him to love others...
              - *It held him to it.*
            - That love of Christ was such a beautiful thing that Paul found himself driven to imitate it...
    - c. And I would say that if you will look at it and if you will understand it...
      - it will do much to compel you too.
- B. So come now and take a good admiring look at the greatness of Jesus as seen in His loving sacrificial service!
1. First, admire how he takes up the cause of others as His own. This is love.
    - a. We live in such a cold, heartless world, where many are unconcerned about the needs of others...
      - and understand, that wherever such concern is found in our society, it almost always has its roots in Christianity...
      - Go to a Hindu country, and you will see people under great affliction with no one to care for them...

- More and more, as we drift away from the positive effects of the gospel, we see this same lack of concern in our society...
  - More and more, you hear young people saying,
    - “Why should I care about their problems? I have my own concerns.”
- b. But in verse 28, the Lord Jesus says He came to give His life a ransom for many.
- 1) This is a remarkable thing, for He is the Son of God who came from heaven to do this...
    - He came from glorious eternal fellowship with His heavenly Father—from a place where He had perfect peace and perfect love.
    - And the thing that drove Him to come was His concern for His people!
    - He had no need, but He came solely to meet our need...to give His life a ransom for many.
  - 2) What does this mean, to give His life a ransom for many?
    - a) A ransom is a price that is paid to set a person free from slavery...
      - It is a purchase price that is provided to buy one out of slavery...
      - For example, in the early days of the church, many believers were slaves.
        - Some of them had cruel masters who persecuted them...
        - When their Christian brothers and sisters saw this, they would sometimes purchase them from these masters to set them free.
        - The price paid was called a ransom.
    - b) The ransom Jesus came to pay was a ransom that no mere human being could pay...
      - The whole human race had fallen into sin and we were all slaves to sin and Satan.
        - The debt we owed was not to man but to God’s justice.
        - God is a holy God and His purity and perfect justice demanded that we should be punished in Hell forever and ever.
        - That was what we all owed to God.
      - But Jesus, the Son of God, left the glories of heaven to come to this earth and pay that penalty for those the Father had given Him.
        - His giving Himself as a ransom was the only way we could be set free to serve God...

- As we saw in 2 Cor 5,
    - He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.
- c. Now it is a marvellous thing that our dear Lord should do something like this for a company of sinners!
- 1) The “many” He speaks of are His sheep, chosen from before the foundation of the world to be redeemed in the plan of God.
    - But there is nothing in these chosen ones that makes them more worthy than others,
      - They are just as deserving of judgement as anyone else...
    - Jesus did not redeem them because He thought they deserved to be better treated...
      - It was an act of free love and grace... free in that it was not owed to them in any way.
      - There would have been no injustice done if He had left them all to perish...
        - Even more so when we understand that until He begins His work of grace in our hearts,
          - we all hate Him and would spit in face if given the chance.
  - 2) Now I pointed before that there are few who will give themselves for the needs of others...
    - there are fewer still that will give up themselves for the needs of the wicked who would even spit at them if they had the chance...
      - As it says in Romans 5:7-8:
        - Rom 5:7-8: For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
    - This is exactly what our Lord Jesus did...
      - He came to serve those who hated Him and who had rebelled against His Father...

TRANS> And so the greatness of His service is seen in the fact that He took up the cause of others—even others who were wicked—as His own.

- That is the first thing to admire...

2. Secondly, admire how nothing was able to keep Him from fully carrying out the service that He had purposed to do for them.
  - a. The greatness of loving service is revealed by testing...
    - What does it take to stop it?
    - Love is not very great and service is not very admirable that is terminated as soon as a little trouble arises...
      - If a man claims to love a woman, and then he forsakes her because she has fallen sick, his love is not very great...
  - b. But just look at all that Jesus was willing to endure for our sakes!
    - In our account, we see Him going up to Jerusalem for the last time with His disciples,
      - And as He goes along, He is thinking about what His service of love requires of Him...
      - In verses 17-19, He speaks about it to His disciples for the fourth time!
        - Look at what He says...
- 1) First, He tells them that He is going to be betrayed to the chief priests and scribes...
  - The disciples knew that these men were seeking to kill Jesus,
    - Jesus knew it too...
    - And here he reveals to them that this time, He is going to be delivered into their hands.
  - This was a great hardship that He had to endure—
    - One of His own disciples was going to betray Him...
      - one that He had loved and served and one that had pretended love to him was going to hand him over to His enemies.
  - And to add to this affliction, all the disciples were going to forsake Him in His hour of trial,
    - and not only that,
      - but the Father Himself who is sovereign over all was also going to deliver Jesus over into the hands of these enemies on account of the sins of the people Jesus came to redeem.

TRANS> See the love of our Saviour who would not be daunted though He knew all this.

- 2) Secondly, Jesus says that once He is delivered over to these chief priests and scribes,
- they will condemn Him and pronounce Him worthy of death...
  - They were not authorised to execute anyone because God had put them under Roman rule as an act of judgement upon them,
    - But they could still hold court and that they did, concluding in the name of the whole church of God that Jesus deserved to die.
      - That was the official pronouncement of the covenant people of which we who belong to the church are members today.
  - Yet, for that very church that condemned Him, Jesus was giving himself as a ransom.
  - What great love is this that even this did not stop Him!
- 3) Thirdly, Jesus says that having been handed over to the Gentiles, He will be mocked, scourged, and crucified...
- a) You know how they stripped him and put a robe on him,
- and how they struck him told him to prophesy,
  - and how they placed a crown of thorns on His head to mock Him...
  - The Son of God knew all this—
    - yet He still continued His service of love...
    - He continued to go on toward Jerusalem for this purpose...
- b) And you know how they scourged Him,
- striking him again and again with a cruel leather whip into which was tied bits of bone and metal to tear into his flesh...
  - The Son of God knew all this—
    - yet He still continued His service of love...
    - He continued to go on toward Jerusalem for this purpose...
- c) And you know how they crucified Him—nailing Him to the cross to die a very slow and painful death...the most shameful death of all...
- You know how here on the cross He was cursed of God for our sakes, bearing all our shame and guilt...
  - The Son of God knew all this—
    - yet He still continued His service of love...
    - He continued to go on toward Jerusalem to redeem us.

TRANS> There is no love like this love!

- It is a marvellous service of love that deserves our highest admiration!
  - Nothing could stop Him, but He pressed on to the very end!
3. Thirdly, admire how His service accomplishes its purpose.
- Jesus did not do all this as a mere show, but what He did actually redeemed us.
- a. This is proven by the fact that on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead.
- His resurrection is the testimony that the Father accepted His sacrifice for our sins.
  - Jesus knew before He went to the cross that His work would be accepted, and that is why He went...
    - He did not go as a mere show...
    - He went in order that He might actually redeem His people.
- b. And so even though we speak much of His service as an example today...
- let us never forget that it was much more than an example...
    - It was a true service for His people that met all the demands of holy justice for the forgiveness of their sins.
    - It had to be done, else they could not have been saved.
- c. Real service to God is not mere words or symbolism...
- It is service that truly does good to the one who receives it.
  - There is so much service today that is done to make the one serving feel good, but the service Jesus did was benefit others.

TRANS> The cross is the place where the greatness and beauty of divine love is displayed like nowhere else...

- It is a love that knew no limits...
- It is the same love that has been exchanged between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for all eternity...
- And at the cross this love is displayed in a way that we can understand it...
  - Its true character and depth is revealed in sacrifice—
    - showing the love of the Son of God to the Father in a way that we can understand...
    - and bringing us into that love for all eternity.



TRANS> Brothers and sisters, do you not admire this love?

- Do you not want love like this in the church?
  - in your family?
  - in your own soul?
- It is loving service like this that Jesus came to establish among us!
  - This is the greatness that He calls us to seek for ourselves in His kingdom:
    - “Whoever desires to be great among you, let Him be your servant... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”
    - Admire it that you might imitate it...
      - This is the greatness you are to pursue.
- But now I want to issue a warning to you:

## **II. Beware of that noxious tendency in you to pursue a very different kind of greatness—**

A. In our text, the sons of Zebedee show us the kind of greatness we naturally seek...

1. Ever since the fall,

- we are all conceived in sin and come from the womb—
  - not with a desire to be great in service to others—
  - but with a desire to be served.

a. God’s grace curbs our sinful nature in many ways...

1) In His common grace, He uses fear or punishment, shame, laws, and many other things to restrain our self-seeking tendencies...

- Common grace keeps the world from being as wicked as it would otherwise be—it keeps us from utterly destroying ourselves...
- But give a man unlimited power without restraint, and you will see how selfish we can be...
  - If cannibalism is the acceptable thing in a society, everyone will pretty much go along with it...
  - If sexual immorality is acceptable (as it is increasingly in our society), you will find it everywhere.

2) And then there is special grace which restrains us even more...

- Special grace is that grace that comes to those who are born again...
  - When God bestows special grace on you,

- He changes your heart and gives you a new heart that will receive His word—believe it and obey it...
- But special grace is not yet perfected in any who are yet in this world...

TRANS> And so,

- b. Despite God's restraint of us by common grace and special grace,
    - there is still plenty of that old yearning to be served rather than to serve in every one of us...
2. And so it is that the sons of Zebedee come to make a request of Jesus that exposes the kind of greatness they are after!
- a. In verse 20, we are told that they come with their mother...
    - who makes a request of Jesus for them...
    - Now it seems pretty certain that their mother was Jesus' aunt, being His mother Mary's sister,
      - so perhaps they thought she would be able to have more influence upon him...
      - sort of like those who ask Jesus' mother to ask Jesus to do this or that today...
  - b. Look at what she requests!
    - v. 20: Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and the other on your left, in Your kingdom.
- 1) Do you see what she is asking here?
- Her sons were among the three disciples with whom Jesus had the most intimate connection—they were James and John...
    - Peter was the third, of course...
  - Just a short time ago,
    - they had heard Jesus say that the twelve disciples would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel...
    - And just now, Jesus had told of His suffering, but also of His resurrection!
- 2) It would seem that they looked at this and concluded that Jesus was going up to Jerusalem—
- that He would suffer some how or another...that was not the important part...

- and then in three short days be raised again!
  - Surely that would be the time when He would establish His kingdom!
- So here they are, going up to Jerusalem with Jesus with an entirely different mindset from that of their Master...
    - Jesus is going up contemplating His great service that He is going to accomplish on the cross...
    - James and John are going up contemplating being set up on thrones with dominion and riches and servants at their beck and call.
    - Jesus is looking at how He will soon serve, and they are looking at how they will soon be served!
      - It was an entirely opposite kind of greatness they were seeking!
- c. No wonder Jesus tells them,
- “You (*you* is plural here) do not know what you ask!”
  - If they wished to be on Jesus right and left hand,
    - they would find themselves in the place of the two thieves that were crucified with our Lord...
      - one on His right and the other on His left!
  - But they were not asking for opportunities to sacrificially serve...
    - They were looking to be served by others!
    - This is what they (and their mother who spoke for them) were asking for!
3. The other disciples were greatly displeased when they heard this question...
- and I think we are too...
    - How could they be so self-centred—Jesus is going to be crucified and they are looking for positions of honour!
- a. But the disciples were more full of envy than with righteous indignation...
- Jesus calls them all to instruct them about true greatness...
  - Their concern was not the same as Jesus’ concern...
    - They were irritated because they were after the same positions!
- b. But you need to be careful too—

- 1) Before you criticise too much, I would ask you to take a look at your prayers.
  - What kind of requests do you bring to Jesus most often?
  - Do you ask Him to give you opportunities to glorify Him through your service to others...
    - or are you more often asking Him to serve you?
  - I don't mean that we should never ask Him for healing of sickness or for our daily bread—we are supposed to do that...
    - but the question is,
      - Where is your greatest desire?
        - Is it to lay down your life for Jesus in this world?
        - Or is it to be comfortable in this world?
- 2) Really, what do you want most in this world?
  - to do good?
    - or to have it good?
  - I think the honest answer is pretty easy to discover.
    - We need to change.
    - We are quite a lot like James and John.

B. Look at what Jesus does to help them understand... and to help us understand who read this today...

1. First, He asks a question that is designed to turn our focus to the right place...
  - a. He says,
    - “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink and to be baptised with the baptism that I am about to be baptised with?”
  - 1) By drinking the cup that He is about to drink,
    - He speaks of the affliction that He is about to undergo—
      - The affliction He has just described as
        - being betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and scribes,
        - condemned by them,
        - and delivered over to the Romans to be mocked, scourged, and crucified!
    - This is hardly a picture of sitting on a throne in a place with servants fanning you...

- This is a picture of a reed and a crown of thorns, of jeering, and of the relentless scourge, of hanging from a cross!
  - To drink a cup is an expression used to refer to taking it all—
    - following through to the very end...
    - drinking the whole thing.
- 2) And being baptised with His baptism,
- speaks of having these afflictions joined to you as your own...
    - Baptism is always about brining two things together in such a way that the thing baptising comes permanently upon the thing baptised.
- 3) Jesus has in view here a suffering that will continue for as long as you are in this world.
- a) You see, this is a fallen world and it is contrary to God...
- And as long as you live here, your service to God will be opposed and resisted.
  - You will have members of your family angry with you because you keep the Lord's Day holy...
  - You will have people mocking you because of your chastity...
  - You will lose jobs because you refuse to tell lies...
- b) Jesus was going to suffer until the day He died,
- and here He is asking these disciples and us if we are ready to suffer until the day we die...
  - are we willing to drink the whole cup...
- b. They answer his question with way too much haste...
- 1) We know this because of the way they respond when Jesus is crucified—
- and from the way they ask if He is now to restore the kingdom after He is raised from the dead...
  - They still thought their suffering would not be until the day they died.
- 2) They look at suffering for Christ in the same way we so often do...
- as something that they always expect to end *in this life*.
  - It **will** end at death,

- but we are always inclined to think that we have suffered enough in this life and that days of smooth sailing will soon appear.
- c. Beware of this attitude! It has caused many to stumble!
- 1) It causes some to stumble in that when suffering comes, they are unprepared because they did not expect it.
    - They feel as if something has gone wrong when in fact things are going just as planned...
    - Do not be surprised brothers and sisters, the Lord has told us that it will come.
  - 2) The attitude that suffering should be over now causes others to compromise...and to put down their guard...
    - I believe this has happened to almost the whole church in North America today...
      - Because we so desire peace,
        - we have a tendency to give up those doctrines and those laws of God that are opposed by other Christians...
      - But I would remind you that all of the prophets were opposed more by people within the covenant than they were by those who were on the outside...
        - You cannot expect to have peace in this world...even in the church...
          - Jesus says that there will always be persecution and you must expect it...
  - 3) Indeed, there is a sense in which you ought to even look for it!
    - a) I don't mean you ought to try to bring it on...
      - like some of those silly monks who would whip themselves and starve themselves and expose themselves to the weather in a foolish attempt to be holy...
      - or like those who go out being obnoxious so they can be persecuted...
    - b) But I mean if you are serving Christ and people don't like it...
      - i. You should truly count it a blessing...
        - Jesus clearly teaches you to rejoice when you are persecuted for righteousness sake.

- You ought to welcome it.
- ii. Can you see why you should?
- a. First, you should welcome persecution because it is your opportunity to show God how much you love Him.
    - When Abraham was called to offer his son Isaac and he prepared to do so, the Lord then said,
      - “now I know that your fear God... since you have not withheld your son, your only *son*, from Me.”
    - In the same way, you show your love for God by continuing to serve Him when you are opposed—
      - or by serving Him with patience when you are called to suffer as Job was.
  - b. Second, welcome persecution because it is your opportunity to show **others** how much you love your Lord...
    - The great thing about suffering is that people take you seriously when you suffer for what you believe...
    - As the saying goes, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church...
      - When we pray that our witness would be more effective, we are indirectly praying that we would be privileged to suffer for Jesus’ sake.
  - c. Third, welcome persecution because it is your opportunity to cultivate a greater love for your Lord...
    - Opposed service will force you to stop and think about how much He means to you...
      - It will make you stop to consider if it is worth it to carry on...
      - and to make that judgement, you will have to look at your Lord and what He means to you.
      - Easy service won’t do that
    - Hard service will strengthen your love and make it deeper...
      - Of course you would like for that deepening to happen without the suffering, but suffering is the way that God has appointed.

TRANS> So the point is...

- c) Don't be always supposing that suffering and tribulation and persecution will end...
  - expect it to continue as long as you live in this world...
    - it is the cup of Christ that you have been given to drink and the baptism of suffering that you have been baptised with...
    - It is not over until the day you die...
  - So expect it and welcome it.
    - It is **given** to you not only to believe, but also to suffer for His sake.

TRANS> Truly, this is a very hard lesson to learn...

- Nevertheless, you do not need to be discouraged!
- d. James and John did not clue in to what Jesus was really saying...
- They did not see that they were called to drink this cup and be baptised with this baptism until their death...
    - But there are wonderful words of encouragement here for us!
- 1) In verse 23, Jesus tells them...
- "You will indeed drink My cup and be baptise with the baptism that I am baptised with..."
- 2) Do you see why that is a great encouragement?
- a) Even though these brothers did not understand what Jesus was really saying—even though they still thought the suffering would end...
    - Jesus tells them that they **will** continue with Him to the end of their lives...
      - They really would drink His cup and they really would be baptised with His baptism.
  - b) Dear Christian, let this give you assurance that if you are really God's child and not a Judas...
    - He will keep you to the end...
      - He will see to it that you drink the cup to the very bottom...
      - By His grace, He will preserve you in His way
    - So do not give up...



- Do not think it is too hard to serve the Lord...
- It is hard, but it is not too hard...
  - His grace will keep you to the end.

TRANS> And just what is it that His grace will keep you doing?

C. His grace will keep you serving others instead of lording it over them the way nations do...

1. It will keep you serving instead of demanding to be served...
  - Hear what Jesus says in verse 25-26:
    - 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—
  - He calls you to be different...
    - In the world,
      - greatness is all about being served—
      - the greater you are, the more people you have serving you...
    - But in Christ's kingdom, greatness is about serving others...
      - the way Jesus does.
      - the greater you are, the more you serve.
2. This means, Christian, that you are to see service as the highest place, as the true mark of greatness...
  - a. The service of love is the beauty of Christ's kingdom.
    - The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength;
    - and the second is like it—love your neighbour as yourself...
      - And this love is always expressed in faithful service.
      - It is expressed in service that continues through all kinds of hardships.
  - b. As we have seen, in this world, those hardships can be expected to continue...
    - But when we get to heaven, the loving service that was forged in the fires of persecution and suffering will continue,
      - The suffering will end, but the love will continue...

- In heaven, instead of loving service to God being opposed as it is now, it will be admired and delighted in...
  - That is just what heaven will be—
    - a world where loving service will flow freely from one to another without any hindrance...
- c. But for all eternity, we will look back at this world and see where that love was proven...
- at the cross where our Lord endured all things in order that He might redeem us...
    - His cross will stand forever as a glorious display of the deep deep love of God for His people and for His Father.
    - And all of your acts of service in this world...
      - whether the widow's mite that nobody noticed...
      - or a martyrdom that everybody saw...
        - All of these deeds of service will be recorded in the records of heaven and seen for what they are...
        - They will be admired and rejoiced in for all eternity to the glory of God.

Brothers and sisters,

- Let this greatness of serving God through troubles be your greatness!
  - You will only have the years of this life to serve God in this way...
  - Make the most of the opportunity...
    - God has so ordered things in this world that through the fall, redeeming love might be displayed for all eternity!
    - Let it be seen in you to the glory of God, for it is lovely!