

Matthew 19-20: Commitment to the Kingdom

In Matthew 19 there is a theme of service to the kingdom of God, which is shown by love towards one's spouse and toward children, and respect for everyone in the Christian community. These points were made by two antithetical questions. First the Pharisees asked, "How little can I give, what is the minimal service that I can render to my spouse?" And Jesus gave the answer, "You should not be asking that question; you should ask rather what God's plan for marriage is." Shortly after that a rich young ruler came and asked, "If I give the maximum to God, can I be sure that God will notice and will in some way reward me or give me my due for this form of service?" Jesus showed that was a faulty question too because he had not really given the maximum to God.

Then Peter said, "While he would not give up everything, we have. What then will there be for us? What reward will we have?" Jesus answered Peter and the other disciples, saying, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Jesus is concerned that if Peter or anyone is too interested in rewards it may mean that they are serving God for their own benefit and their hearts have begun to stray from God; they are losing their first love. Although they will not be lost or condemned if they have truly given themselves to God, for He will keep them, they may find themselves last in the kingdom.

Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the statement that "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." In the parable a land owner hires a group of men to work twelve hours for a denarius, which is one day's wage, so it is a fair deal. The agreement is acceptable to all. But then a little while later he realizes that his human resources are not sufficient to bring in the harvest so he hires some more men who work nine hours, some who work six, and some who work three. Even at the eleventh hour of the day, in order to get the harvest in, he still hires people who only work one hour. At the end of the day the land owner gathers the people together to receive their pay and the people who worked only one hour were paid first, and they received a full day's wage. The people who worked a full day were delighted at this; they cannot wait until their turn. They think they are working for a man who is very generous and that they will receive more than they were promised.

Meanwhile, the people who worked three hours also get paid one denarius, a full day's wage. Then the people who worked six and nine hours also get a day's wage, and by this time the people who worked a full day are beginning to notice a pattern. When their time comes and they are paid a day's wage for a day's work, they are quite angry. As Jesus tells the parable in Matthew 20:11, "When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Did you not agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Do I not have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" Then Jesus concludes by repeating that "the last will be first and the first will be last."

Many people sense something unfair in this parable. Like the workers who worked a full day, they tend to think that those who worked longer should get more in order for justice to be maintained. What one needs to consider, however, is that there are two kinds of justice—retributive and distributive. Retributive justice is giving everybody exactly what they deserve. Distributive justice is treating everybody exactly the same way. If you want retributive justice from God, you can have it; it is called

punishment for your sins. When God is gracious to someone and not to another, people think He is unfair because they are stuck on the concept of distributive justice. But God is always going to give retributive justice; He will always give everyone at least what they deserve. We should not grumble but give thanks that He gives others more than they deserve or better than they deserve, but He does not have an obligation to give an equal amount of grace to every person. God is God and He can do as He pleases. And we can know that He will always be just for His nature is just.

God does not give everybody the same thing. He always gives people at least what they deserve and often gives them more. The way this parable applies to many of us is that when someone who has been a disciple for a long time watches God be generous to someone else, he might ask, "How can you be as generous to her when I worked for you for all these years, and I was a Christian at the age of ten and I poured myself out in Christian ministry for 70 years or 20 or 30 years and here is some person like the thief on the cross who has only been a believer for a few hours and he gets the same reward in heaven as I do." When you begin to grumble in that way, you are grumbling against God, and when you are grumbling against God then you are in danger of being last in the kingdom. The point of the parable is that even disciples can lose their appreciation of God's love and God's grace and dwell too much on works and merits and rewards. There is such a thing as reward, but if you dwell upon reward, you may find yourself leaving God as you worry too much about yourself.

This leads very naturally into the next section, in which Jesus now speaks to His disciples about the price that He will pay. Some of them are not sure they want to pay the price to get a reward. Jesus says in Matthew 20:17-19 that He is going up to Jerusalem and is going to be betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death, turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

The disciples, particularly James and John and their mother, whom they apparently put up to this, do not seem to pay any attention to that teaching whatsoever. In the very next scene, one of the saddest sequences in the Gospels, the mother of Zebedee's sons comes and says to Jesus in Matthew 20:21, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." To sit at the right and the left is to ask to sit at the positions of highest honor, so they are asking for the highest honors or rewards for their service. It is easy to be hard on them for this, and in fact, I have been hard on them for this, but it is also true that this is precisely a believer's error. Only a believer could make a mistake like this. After all, Jesus said to the disciples in Matthew 19:28, "You will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel." So in a sense, this is a mistake that they make precisely because they believe Jesus was telling the truth and they expect Him to do something. So it is an act of folly, but it is also an act of belief and we should not be too hard on them for that. And indeed, Jesus is not too hard on them. Jesus approaches, not with a direct rebuke, but rather He says simply, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?"

Some people think that leadership is a matter of giving orders and making decisions and giving commands, but that is not leadership. Leadership is seeing what needs to be done, giving orders, and then doing everything you can to get it done. So when you ask to be a leader, what you are asking for is the privilege of doing more, of doing more of what needs to be done. So to ask for greatness, to ask, for example, for great wealth, is to ask for great cares and anxiety and stewardship responsibilities. To ask for a lofty position of authority is to ask for the responsibility to care for a great number of people. To be very useful, you have to pay a price; you have to serve longer and harder than others.

We must understand the first century mind in order to understand Jesus' question, "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" The 'cup' in the Old Testament is a symbol of God's wrath. You can find

examples in Isaiah 51, Jeremiah 25, and Revelation 18. The statement that is often made in the Bible is, “I will make the nations who were sensual and self-indulgent and lived for pleasure to drink the cup until they are drunk.” The image is not just of drinking, but to drink down to the dregs, and to drink all the alcohol and drink the bitter parts—they did not have distillation then, so there would be twigs and roots and branches—at the bottom of the cup. They would drink the bitterness and drink the alcohol until they were staggering and drunk and, as the prophets say, falling down and vomiting and lying in their vomit. “Can you drink that?” Jesus asks. “Can you drink the cup of God’s wrath toward sin?” Well they answer, curiously enough, “We can.” Jesus then says that they will drink, but not in the same way Jesus will. Jesus drank on the cross; they drank by persecution in their life. They did not understand that at the time, and Jesus continued, “To sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

The other ten heard this exchange and they were indignant. Now they may have been indignant because John and James beat them to it. They may have been indignant because they used their mother; how unfair! But one way or another they were indignant Jesus uses the occasion for teaching. He teaches them with something called climatic parallelism, which is a kind of poetry. It is evident in the Greek, but using a strict translation of what Jesus says in Matthew 20:26-28 we can see it even in the English. He says, “Whoever wishes among you to be great must be your servant.” That is the first element. Secondly He says, “Whoever wishes among you to be first must be your slave.” So if you want to be great then you have to be servant. If you want to be first, which is greater than great, you have to be slave, which is lower than a servant. The one who is greatest of all, the Son of Man, was not simply a slave, but He gave His life as a ransom for many. He gave His life not just in service, but He died. The higher you want to be, the more you have to pay. This is opposite, of course, from the way it is in the world. The Gentile rulers lorded it over others. And that is largely the way it is in today’s world; the higher you are, the more orders you give, and the more lackeys you have. “But not so with you,” Jesus says. For His followers, true leadership is in the number served, not the number serving.

Now there is something else that is very interesting in this passage and that is the little word “just as” in Matthew 20:20. Notice what Jesus says here. He says two things: He says first that His life is a pattern for ours. So if you want to be great, you have to follow the path of the Son of Man. And yet there is another sense in which Jesus is teaching them that their life cannot be like His. We see this imitation of Christ motif several times in the Gospels, even in Matthew. We saw it first in the Beatitudes. As you look at those traits, they are the traits of Christ. So the blessed character of a disciple is also the blessed character of Christ. In Matthew 8-10 the traits of Jesus as He performed His ministry are the traits that we should have when we conduct our ministry. Jesus gave freely so we give freely. Jesus did not have a supply of money as He went, so we do not have a supply of money as we go. Jesus moved from town to town so we move from town to town. Jesus said the kingdom is coming; we say the kingdom is coming. So Jesus’ life is a pattern for ours. In this section, we find greatness as He does, in service.

On the other hand, one of the things we always need to distinguish as Christians is when Jesus is our pattern and when He is not. Sometimes people like to make their decisions as Christians by asking, “What would Jesus do?” Well, maybe Jesus would read minds; maybe Jesus would just see into the future and then He would know. But those are not options for us. So we cannot make our decisions simply based upon what Jesus would do. Sometimes to try to do what Jesus would do would even be blasphemous. He came to give His life as a ransom for many, and that is something we cannot do. That is something only He does. But on our own scale, in our context, we are to serve others and use our lives for their good just as He did.

Ransom is one of the four great words Jesus uses to describe His sacrifice. The term ‘ransom’ is a word that comes from the realm of commerce. In that analogy of commerce, the Bible says that we are like slaves. The Bible says we are slaves to sin, slaves to death, and slaves to the devil. The Scripture asserts our slavery to those things, and it looks to us as if we are hostages held against our will and unable to do a thing about it. Therefore, someone needs to come and buy us out of slavery. It is as though we have been taken hostage by our sin, by death, and the devil. So Jesus comes and pays a ransom to buy us back. It is not that He actually pays it to anyone—there is nobody who actually has that power—but it is a metaphor the Bible uses, that Jesus comes and pays a price to buy us back to Himself. Paul makes the statement that you are not your own, you are bought with a price so you belong now to Christ. That is the idea of a ransom. Jesus has bought us back Himself.

The second great word that the Bible uses to describe our salvation is justification. The word justification rarely appears in the Gospels, but the idea is there even when the word is not. When we think of the word justification, we should think in front of the judge in a law court and the evidence has just been brought in. There are great stacks of it: videotapes and audiotapes, not only of what we actually we did, not only of what we said, but also what we thought, what we would have liked to have said, what we would have liked to have done on various occasions, and there it all is and the judge is going to pass his judgment. He is going to make his decree as to whether we are guilty or not guilty. But instead of the judge condemning us on the basis of all this evidence, He strikes all the evidence and brings in other evidence, and the other evidence is the life of Christ and all that He said and all that He did and all that He thought. All that evidence is reckoned to our account. In this case God is the judge and He is also our defense counsel and He also takes care of the evidence so that instead of declaring us guilty as we deserve, He declares us innocent.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, which is used in many churches as an aid to understanding Scripture, says, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace toward sinners. It is an act of grace toward sinners in which He pardons all their sins and accepts them as righteous in His sight only because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and received by faith alone.” There is a double exchange. Jesus does not simply wipe out our sin, His righteousness is also imputed. We are not taken back to zero by the work of Christ and then told, “Now be good.” Rather, after our sins are wiped out, His righteousness is imputed to us, reckoned to us, or given to us legally.

The third word that the Bible uses is propitiation. Propitiation pertains to the realm of the temple or the place of worship before God. The idea is that someone who is held to account by God (or, the gods, in the case of the Greeks) has angered God and something must be done to appease His anger—namely, a sacrifice needs to be offered. In the pagan concept of propitiation, the gods get angry because you have ignored them and you have to buy their favor by giving some really costly sacrifice. The biblical concept is different, of course, but the idea remains that God is angry at sin or angry at sinners and that something must be done. The difference is that God’s anger is a just anger and that we are truly liable to His anger. But then Jesus comes and says, “I will do what needs to be done. I will present Myself as the sacrifice.”

The fourth term is reconciliation, which is from the realm of social relationships. It is the idea that some estrangement has taken place among friends or family members. In a human relationship it will often start by a sin and the sin can cause estrangement on two sides. The offended person can be angry at the offender. And the offender may also want to avoid the offended person because of the feelings of guilt and shame that are induced by sin. Both things are also true in our relationship with God due to sin. We want to avoid God and God is also angry at our sin. Depending on the passage of Scripture, one side or other of that may be emphasized. The most remarkable thing to understand is that in God’s relationship

with us, when the reconciliation takes place, it is not the offender who returns to the offended in order to fix the relationship. Instead it is God, the offended party, who sees that there is a breach in the relationship and determines to do something about it. He does not wait for us to take the first step toward Him. He steps toward us and then we respond. That helps us be no longer afraid of Him.

None of these terms are exhaustive. That is, no one of them is adequate by itself to describe what God did for us. Each one of them describes an aspect, and each one describes it through metaphorical language that, if pressed, could lead to misunderstanding. The authors of the New Testament chose these words and ideas that people knew in Greek language and culture, but they made it clear that they applied to the true God in particular ways. For instance with the concept of propitiation, God is not angry in a capricious way like the false gods of the Greeks were portrayed. But we understand that a judge ought to have anger toward sin and the word makes this point, though it is clear that He is a just judge and not a capricious or foolish or poor judge who judges according to his mood on that particular day. Similarly with ransom, it can be misunderstood because it is just an ordinary word. It is a word from human language, which comes from human customs and human patterns, and human patterns are marked by sin, misunderstanding, folly and all the rest. But it is also a concept we understand. We understand what it means to be under somebody's control. We understand it is not a pretty picture to be a hostage. But no biblical writer meant that we were literal hostages, as though Satan held us in a prison cell somewhere and God had to pay money to Satan. The word ransom is simply a metaphor to communicate that we were in a desperate position, unable to deliver ourselves, and so God delivered us.

It is very easy to be trite about the idea that we have to serve each other. It is very easy to say that we want to serve the way Christ called us to serve, but it is a different thing to do it. For example, when I first studied the Matthew 20:27-28 passage two and a half years ago, in order to develop this lecture, one of my students at Covenant Seminary asked me to speak at a junior high youth retreat. I was a junior high youth leader when I was in my early twenties and it was an unmitigated disaster. It was a very bad experience that I had not yet fully recovered from, so I told him 'no.' He was very persistent, however, and continued to ask me and offered me all kinds of perks in order to increase my interest in speaking at the event. This lasted several weeks and eventually I said I would do it. At just about the time I said 'yes,' I realized that I had been doing the opposite of what this passage said. If I could have said, "I do not do junior high events," Jesus could have said, "I do not do crucifixions." In the end, the retreat went alright. It was not the best weekend of my life, but the leaders were pleased so it that was good enough. It is those kinds of experiences, when we have opportunities to decide whether to serve or not, that test whether we are really obeying Christ's call to serve.