

Today God's Mercy Calls Us from Selfish to Selfless

Matthew 20:17–28 ¹⁷ Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” ²² “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but 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.” ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

In Christ Jesus who gave his life as the ransom price for our sin, dear fellow redeemed,

When is this coronavirus going to leave us alone? Wouldn't it be great if we knew the answer to that question! Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could see into the future and know that in a month or two or three everything's back to normal, that our family is healthy, our jobs are secure, and the nation's economy is strong? Tell me, do you think such knowledge of the future would impact the thoughts and actions we are having right now? Maybe, but then again, maybe not. Today we see what happens when our Lord's first disciples are given a glimpse into the future. We'll consider their actions and our own under the theme: Today God's Mercy Calls us from selfish to selfless.

You and I don't know what will happen three minutes from now let alone 3 months from now. But our Lord Jesus does. Now understand, when Jesus was visibly present on earth, he didn't make full and constant use of his divine powers. He didn't go around telling people specific details about their future. But every once-in-a-while he did peel back the curtain of time and give his disciples a look at what lay ahead. He does that here in our text: **Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” (Matthew 20:17-20).**

Twice before Jesus has shared details of what would happen in Jerusalem. The first time he was scolded by Peter. The second time we're told **“...that the disciples were filled with grief” (Matthew 17:23).** Now, on this third occasion, there is no immediate response on the part of the disciples. And yet, there must be a connection to what follows: **Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” (Matthew 20:20-21).** This may sound like an odd request, but here's some context that might make some sense of it. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus told

the disciples: “**...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.**”

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, believe they have figured something out. They seem pretty sure that Jesus is about to become the kind of king they have always imagined he would be. Working through their mother, a dear follower of Jesus, one he'd never think to deny, they see their opportunity to grab the best seats in Jesus' kingdom. Why should those seats go to anyone else? First come, first served!

Have you ever seen anything like it – people taking a bit of information about the future and using it to their own advantage? I think you have. I think you are seeing it right now. Where is all the hand sanitizer, all the disinfectant, all the toilet paper? Where's all the chicken? It's all gone. Why? Because as soon as people heard the news about a virus that might be coming our way, they rushed to buy as much of this stuff as they could. You heard about the two brothers in Tennessee who bought nearly 18,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, hoping to jack up the price and sell it for a huge profit. Closer to home, I arrived at Sam's Club last week just in time to see a woman leaving with so much toilet paper in her cart that the packages kept falling out.

How do you feel about that? Disgusted? Angry? Why? What makes us feel this way? A little soul-searching is in order with the help of Jesus' first followers. You heard about what James and John did. What about the others? **When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.** (Matthew 20:24). Why were those disciples so angry? Do you have a thought? In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I don't read minds or hearts. But because I know my own heart and mind fairly well, here's what I think was going on. I think the ten were angry because James and John beat them to the punch. They wished they would have thought to ask for those seats of honor. Maybe each man felt himself more deserving than the others. I'm ashamed to tell you those are exactly the kind of thoughts I was having at Sam's Club the other day about things far less important than a seat next to Jesus. As I watched that lady pushing a cart overflowing with toilet paper, I thought, “How selfish. You better have left some for me! Wish I would have gotten here 20 minutes earlier!” I rushed to the back of the store to find a few packages left. Now I was confronted with a new thought: “How many packages should I take?”

As I told you, I don't read hearts and minds, but Jesus does. His response to his twelve disciples gives us a pretty good idea of what was going on inside of all of them: **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you.”** (Matthew 20:25-26).

Simply put, the people of this world are in it for themselves. They grab for themselves as much as they can, whether it's power, or fame, or riches, or hand sanitizer, or Clorox Wipes, or even toilet paper. They do this at the expense of everyone else. They don't care. Nothing is more important than their own needs and wants. But “Not so with you” says Jesus. Jesus doesn't shout or yell these words. He doesn't have to. His words are packed with power, the power of God himself, power that exposes sin and convicts the sinner, convicts me, not just of selfish thoughts and acts. No, Jesus' words get at the heart of my greatest problem – which is my heart itself, a heart, that by nature, is hell-bent on making everything, everything all about me. “Not so with you.” These words of Jesus expose the fact that my heart, by nature, is at war with my confession of Christ. I proclaim him my Lord and Savior and yet so often I stage a coup, anointing myself as Lord in his place by giving into and gratifying the cravings of my sinful nature. I make my needs and my wants more important than everyone else in my life, even more important than Jesus.

I know what this means. I'm a hypocrite, saying one thing, but doing another. I'm not alone. You have the same problem because you have a sinful nature of your own. You know about this inner battle with its daily conflicts and casualties. Like me, this frightens you. You're afraid, I'm afraid that the day will come when our sin brings God's anger down on us. Is he punishing us right now? Is the worst yet to come? Will the One who says today, “Not so with you” one day soon say,

“I never knew you. Away from me...” (Matthew 7:23)? I know that this is what I deserve for my sin. But Scripture chases away all our fears with the most wonderful promise of all: **“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:10).** Nothing that is happening in our lives right now is punishment from God. Jesus has not disowned us. He never will. How can we be sure? Listen: **“...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1).**

Being in Christ means believing what he says when he tells us: **“...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28).** Think of it, God’s Son became the Son of Man, became human like us to buy back the many, that is all people, from their slavery to sin. Our selfless Savior gave himself as the ransom price for our selfish world. There is now no condemnation for us because he bore in his body God’s anger and punishment in our place. There is nothing left for us to suffer, nothing left for us to do, no favors for which to ask, because Jesus has paid the price, finished the work and has earned for us God’s forgiveness and a place in his family.

You see, dear friend, your every need has been anticipated and even now is being provided for by Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior. The One who conquered death and hell lives to stand at your side. He’s busy making sure that no threat, spiritual or physical, will separate you from his love. To this end, he even promises to turn every challenge, every setback, every disappointment and heartache into a blessing for you. You and I have nothing to worry about – nothing.

Do you know what this means? Do see how different life can be when God is with you to protect and care for you? It frees us completely from our old self-centered ways. And so it is that God’s mercy calls us from selfishness to selfless. It does more than call us. It moves and empowers us! Now that we don’t have to spend our time and energy looking out for number one, we can live to thank and praise him who really is Number One! What does such life look like? It looks very strange to the world’s way of thinking. Jesus says: **“...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...” (Matthew 20:26-27).**

In Jesus’ kingdom, greatness isn’t measured by wealth, power, or fame. No, in his kingdom, great are the people who put the needs and wellbeing of family, friends, and even strangers above their own, knowing full well that they can afford to do this because God is busy meeting their every need in Christ.

We’re living through a strange, unsettling time, but we are here for such a time as this, to show the love of Jesus to our children, our parents, our congregation, and community. Right now, that love is shown by listening to the experts and our government officials, and in this way do everything we can to stay healthy and protect the health of others. We show love by picking up only what we need from the store, and in this way making sure there’s food and supplies left for our neighbor. We’re here to look after the needs of those who shouldn’t venture out right now. Can we supply them with food, go to the store or pharmacy for them? Is there anything we can do to help those who are laid off from work? Of course, the most important thing we can do is to use this time of uncertainty and fear to point people to Jesus and his saving promises.

You and I don’t know the future, but we don’t need to. We know the One who is Lord of time – past, present, and future. In the past our Lord died to serve and save us. Today he lives to bless us and not just you and me. Christ lives to make us a blessing to many, many others so that one day in the future, they too may share in the glory that will be ours for Jesus’ sake. Amen.