

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **A Mother's Selfish Request**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 20:17-34

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: September 21, 2008

Introduction:

The last will be first and the first, last.

The way up is down.

The one who wants to lead must become a servant.

These are truths Jesus makes explicitly clear in the passages we have recently been studying; in fact, in a sense our last two sermons and the one today all have the same essential message. I trust you recall the conclusion of the story of the Rich Young Ruler in chapter 19: "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Matthew 19:30). The very next passage was "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard," which Pastor Dick handled so well for us last week. The conclusion to that parable was the same: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (20:16).

Now today we are going to hear the same theme a third time, as Jesus uses a mother's selfish request to drive home this truth to His disciples: "Whoever want to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27). This must be a very important concept to Jesus; thus it is also a very important one for us to consider (more than just consider, to accept).

One of the sorriest chapters in the lives of the Twelve Disciples occurred when the mother of two of them comes to ask a special favor of Jesus. As always, He finds the teachable moment in any situation, and in the process communicates to us the importance of servant leadership. But in order for us to get the maximum benefit from this story, I think it is important for us to start our reading in verse 17 of Matthew 20.

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "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 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!"

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"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."

"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.

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."

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave

How *not* to be great in God's sight (20-25)ⁱ

Sometimes we can profit as much by learning what *not* to do as what *to* do, and the disciples here reveal plenty not to do. If a person wants to be great in God's sight (which, by the way, is a very noble goal to achieve), he must not employ self-serving ambition.

Self-serving ambition (20-22a). One might be tempted to excuse the mother of James and John in view of the fact that she is just acting like a Jewish mother. Jewish mothers, as well as Greek and Italian, have often been unfairly stereotyped as being inordinately solicitous of their sons' welfare, even to the point of embarrassing their sons. But these two sons were not only not embarrassed at their mothers' intercession on their behalf; they actually participated in it. She came with her two sons.

By the way, have you noticed that James, John, and their mother make an initial request that is intended to set up the ultimate request. This comes out most clearly in Mark's Gospel (10:35): "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." This approach is much like that of a child who is trying to get a parent to promise something before telling what it is out of fear that the request will be denied.

When Jesus declines to give them a blank check but asks what it is they want, the mother of James and John lays it out in bald-faced boldness: "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." I can just see her two sons standing behind her, trying to look extremely pious. They are up to their eyeballs in self-promotion and self-serving ambition.ⁱⁱ

What is amazing is that immediately before this request comes in from James and John and their mother, Jesus speaks of His pending death—that He would be betrayed, arrested, condemned, and would suffer and die. But they are so self-focused that they cannot process the information. Their primary concern seems to be what Peter expressed in his question to Jesus in 19:27: "What then will there be for us?"

And almost 2000 years later many Christians are still echoing Peter's question: "What's in it for me?" The church today does not seem to understand the Cross. An anonymous person has written,

The cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a bright ornament upon the bosom of the self-assured and carnal Christian. . . . The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemns; the new cross assures. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages

it. The old cross brought tears and blood; the new cross brings laughter. The flesh, smiling and confident, preaches and sings about the cross, and before that cross it bows and toward that cross it points with carefully staged histrionics, but upon that cross it will not die and the reproach of that cross it stubbornly refuses to bear.

Instead of embracing the message of the Cross, James and John choose self-serving ambition.

A second characteristic revealing how not to be great in God's sight is self-confidence.

Self-confidence (22b-23), or perhaps a better way to put it is, "overconfidence in self." Jesus' response to the request of James, John, and their mother is, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" And their immediate answer is: "We can," without hesitation, without understanding, and without seeking clarification of exactly what the cup involves.

Well, what does Jesus mean when He asks if they can drink the cup He is going to drink? Mark 10:38 has Him asking two questions: "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" What is the cup and what is the baptism? Clearly these terms are not referring to the ordinances of the church—the Lord's Supper and water baptism. Do you remember Jesus' words in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). The cup is the path of suffering and death.

James and John don't have a clue what Jesus is talking about. They apparently think He's asking if they are capable of reigning, ruling, and governing, not suffering or dying. But look at Jesus' response in verse 23: "you will indeed drink from my cup." They don't realize it now but they too will eventually experience the cup of suffering. James would become the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2), and John would end his long life as a condemned exile on the isle of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). But in the meantime their self-confidence is terribly misplaced. They are definitely not prepared to drink the cup now. We all remember how Peter denied the Lord three times when He was being arrested, but let us not forget that just days after this conversation all the rest of the disciples, including James and John, also fled for their lives, leaving Jesus alone in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus goes on, "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." These places of honor will not be granted on the basis of favoritism or ambition or family relationship but rather on the basis of the Father's sovereign will. It is likely that the mother of James and John was the sister of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, which would make James and John the cousins of Jesus. I wonder if their mother wasn't appealing to Jesus on the basis of family relationship. "Don't you think your cousins should inherit the places of honor in your kingdom?" Jesus makes it clear that it doesn't happen that way.

I was thinking as I studied this passage, "I wonder for whom those places of honor really are reserved?" I doubt if they will be filled by an apostle or a great preacher or a seminary President

or theologian. I suspect those spots will be filled by a little-known martyr, or perhaps a faithful prayer warrior, or maybe a special needs child with a very simple faith in Jesus.

Now a third way in which one should never seek to be great in God's sight is phony indignation.

Phony indignation (24). We are told in verse 24 that "When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers." The fact that in the next verse Jesus calls them all together—not just James and John—to teach all of them about humility and servant leadership, hints to me that the rest of the disciples are not indignant over the request itself but rather over the fact that James and John and their mother got their request in before they could get theirs in. All of the disciples were known to jockey for position in the kingdom. For example, on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum they all argued about who was the greatest (Mark 9:34). Even during the Last Supper, which comes just days after this incident, we discover that "a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest." Thus I am certain that the indignation the ten show to James and John is nothing but phony.

A fourth way not to be great in God's sight is the exercise of raw power.

Raw power (25) Jesus tells them in verse 25, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them." It's common knowledge, He says, that rulers go on power trips. That's just the way it is. If you look at the history of nations, it is a rare leader in a rare country that does not try to consolidate his power and even increase it. How many world leaders can you name who ever surrendered power voluntarily? Think of Putin in Russia or Mugabe in Zimbabwe and the lengths to which they will go to maintain power. Even in our own country, do you really think a Bill Clinton would have relinquished the Presidency if the Constitution didn't require it? George Bush might, because he must be anxious to get back to his Texas ranch after the beating he has taken. But it is simply not normal for great leaders to surrender power.

But please don't think for a moment that this tendency is found only in politics. In business, in education, and even in the church there are radical egomaniacs who love nothing more than to control others.

Then Jesus mentions a related mistake many make: "and their high officials exercise authority over them." I would say this has a slightly different nuance from the rulers who lord it over their subjects, so I refer to it as "charismatic influence."

Charismatic influence (25) I think He is referring here to those who use the powers of popularity and personality to wield personal influence. By flattery, charm, and wit they manipulate others to meet their own ends. It's sad to see how much of this there is in the church today. Christian leadership has to a large extent become a cult of personality. There is a rare megachurch, like John Piper's ministry at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis that has been built on the force of great preaching. Too many are built on the force of great personality.

Now so far our passage has revealed several characteristics that are commonly practiced by those who desire to be powerful, influential, and important in this world—self-serving ambition,

overconfidence in self, phony indignation, raw power, and charismatic influence. But the exercise of these characteristics does not result in greatness as God judges greatness.

How to truly be great in God's sight (26-28)

He has just told them the obvious: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." Then He adds these stark words: "Not so with you." This may be the way the world works; it should not be the way the church works. I am deeply concerned about the degree to which the modern church has adopted without careful discernment the principles and practices of the business world, the marketing techniques of Madison Avenue, and the music of the pop culture.

The operative phrase here is "without careful discernment." The church should operate with sound business principles, and there's nothing inherently wrong with marketing or advertising, and if all we sang were 17th century hymns we would quickly become irrelevant. It's the careful discernment part that concerns me; I don't think the church at large is practicing much of that.

Jesus states unequivocally that the church should be different from the world, and our leaders should be distinguishable from the world's leaders. The first and foremost difference should be that Christian leaders should serve others.

Serve others. (26-27) Jesus turns things completely upside down in respect to greatness. He says, "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." The term "servant" comes from the Greek word *diakonon*, from which we get our word "deacon." It refers to a person who does menial labor, such as cleaning houses or serving meals. While not a term of dishonor, it does describe the lowest level of unskilled labor.

Jesus, however, elevates servanthood to a place of significance and honor. So does Paul. He writes to the proud, self-centered and worldly Corinthians who are name-dropping all the time, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe."

But then Jesus adds another term that goes even further: "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave." The position of a slave was much lower and demeaning than that of a servant. A servant was poor but at least he was his own person. A slave actually belonged to someone else and had absolutely no rights. In several of His letters Paul readily identifies himself as a slave of Jesus Christ.

The cost of greatness in God's sight is humble, selfless, sacrificial service. The Christian who is great and first in the kingdom is the one who is willing to serve in the hard place, the uncomfortable place, the lonely place, the demanding place, the place where he is not appreciated and may even be persecuted.ⁱⁱⁱ I like the contrast that MacArthur sets up:

The world's way of greatness is like a pyramid. The prestige and power of the

great person is built on the many subordinate persons beneath him. But in the kingdom, the pyramid is inverted. . . . God's great men are not sitting on top of lesser men, but bearing lesser men on their backs.

And William Barclay observes wisely,

The world may assess a man's greatness by the number of people whom he controls and who are at his beck and call; or by his intellectual standing and his academic eminence; or by the number of committees of which he is a member; or by the size of his bank balance and the material possessions which he has amassed; but in the assessment of Jesus Christ these things are irrelevant.

Have you ever seen the kind of leadership Jesus talks about here—humble leaders whose default response is to serve others? If not, I would not be greatly surprised, because they are quite rare. But there are a few great leaders who have understood this and lived it out. Mother Teresa comes to mind. Jimmy Carter, whatever you think of his politics (and I don't think much of it), demonstrates this when he goes to a Habitat home and picks up a hammer, often with no cameras around to record it. Do you remember when Carter was President he would sometimes carry his own bag to the helicopter, and the press ridiculed him for doing it. The world wants its leaders to act like leaders; Jesus wants them to act like servants.

The second way in which Christian leaders should be distinguishable from worldly leaders is that they should be like Jesus.

Be like Jesus. (28) In verse 27-28 Jesus makes a comparison in order to put flesh on His teaching: “And whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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.” This is how Jesus lived His whole life. He picked up a little child when the disciples were trying to shew them away. He picked up a towel to wash His disciples' feet when not one of them was humble enough to do it. He asked His disciples at the Last Supper, “Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). The world considers the guest to be more honored; Jesus considers the servant to be more honorable.

Of course, we cannot imitate Jesus in one respect—His giving of his life as a ransom for many. That was something He alone could do because only He had no sin. By the way, this is the first explicit NT teaching about the sacrificial atonement of Christ. He was no mere martyr, nor did He give His life as an example to others of self-giving love. He actually died in our place as a ransom for our sins. That ransom was sufficient for every person, but it is only valid for those who put their faith and trust in Him.

A third way we can be great in God's sight is to walk the talk.

Walk the talk. (29-34) Our chapter ends with a short story about two blind men. At first it seems totally unrelated to the passage we've been studying or to the Triumphal Entry which

follows. But allow me to read it, and then we will ask why it is placed here. Matthew 20:29-34:

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

"Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."

Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

You know something? It's one thing to talk about servant leadership; it's quite another to live it out. Every pastor has preached eloquently about the Good Samaritan, but how many would stop and help a stranded motorist while hurrying to church to preach that sermon?

Jesus is here walking the 17 miles from Jericho to Jerusalem. His disciples are with him, and a large crowd is following, no doubt shouting questions at Him and marveling at His answers. They pass by two blind men sitting by the roadside. Undoubtedly one of the two asks some passerby what all the commotion is about and is told that Jesus is heading their way. Having heard about Him and His miracle-working power, the two blind men, hopeless til now in the extreme, suddenly have a surge of hope. Maybe, just maybe, this Jesus can do something for us, so they shout, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Their shouting interferes with the crowd's ability to hear Jesus' teaching, so the crowd rebukes the two men and tells them to shut up. But they respond with even louder shouts. This may be their one and only chance. Jesus stops and calls to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" He is not in too much of a hurry to listen to them, not too preoccupied to show them compassion.

I suppose they could have asked for a handout; they could have asked for a place to live. Anything He gave them would have made their lives a little easier. But instead they ask for the thing they have lived every day of their lives thinking about—what it would be like to be able to see? "Lord, we want our sight." And Jesus had compassion on them and healed them. And the last sentence says, "Immediately they received their sight and followed him."

But the most important point in this little vignette is this: Jesus has just been teaching His disciples about the importance of lowly service, and now He provides an example of it—serving the individual in the middle of the crowd, serving the handicapped in the middle of the healthy, serving the lost in the middle of those who feel they have it made. He was a true servant leader.

Conclusion: So, in response to a mother's selfish request we are provided here with some timeless truths to think about

The last will be first and the first, last.

The way up is down.

The one who wants to become a leader must become a servant.

But let's not just think about them; let's consider how we can live these truths out this week. Instead of bossing someone around at home or at work, how about asking them how we can make their job easier? Instead of complaining at the waitress because she's slow or didn't get the right salad dressing, how about speaking a word of encouragement to her and maybe even ask her how her kids are doing? Instead of ignoring someone who is in need because you're busy pursuing your agenda, how about stopping to help them with theirs?

May God help us all to follow Jesus in servant leadership.

i. My outline on this passage is borrowed in part from John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 16-23*, 229-246.

ii. Before we express too much self-righteous disdain for what this family is up to, I think we need to realize that the cult of self has also found its way big-time into evangelical circles today—in books, seminars, conferences, and various organizations that promote self under the guise of personal spiritual development. Frequent claims are made that God's design for His people is health, prosperity, success, happiness, and self-fulfillment. As John MacArthur wisely observes, *"A great part of the western church has become self-indulgent, self-satisfied, and self-reliant, claiming numerical and financial growth as evidence of spiritual blessing. It has replaced sacrifice with success, suffering with self-satisfaction, and godly obedience with fleshly indulgence."* (MacArthur, 230).

iii. MacArthur, 243.