



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 28, 2008

Released on Wednesday, September 24, 2008

“Serving Others”

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 20:17-28

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 20:1-28; Mark 10:32-45

DEVOTIONAL READING: Philippians 2:1-11

Matthew 20:17-28

17 And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them,

18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death,

19 And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

20 Then came to him the mother of Zebedee’s children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him.

21 And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.

22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able.

23 And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.

24 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.

25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.

26 But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;

27 And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant:

28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to study Jesus' prophecy of suffering, the request of the mother of James and John, the reaction of the other disciples, and Jesus' definition of ministry.

Principle: to realize that the humble ministry of Jesus ought to be reflected in His followers.

Application: to encourage Christians to be involved in self-effacing service.

INTRODUCTION

Service with a Smile! This slogan used to grace the walls of many stores, service stations, and repair centers. Family businesses made this motto a point of pride. But that philosophy now seems antiquated. The world of the twenty-first century seems too busy to care about such things anymore. Both the smile and the personal service have fallen by the wayside.

For Christians, however, a life of service will never go out of style. Much more than just a good business strategy, service is the lifestyle of the Master. To walk in the footsteps of Jesus is to walk the path of humble servanthood.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 30

Place: Perea

At the point in the Gospel of Matthew that concerns today's lesson, Jesus has nearly reached the end of His three-year ministry. During this time He has healed the sick and fed the hungry. He has given sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He has freed the demon-possessed from their demons. He has even raised the dead. While Jesus' miraculous works have given proof that He is the Son of God, they also have given a clear demonstration of the love of God. Jesus has spent His ministry in the service of humanity, showing people the way to God.

Popular excitement was building, even though Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that most people wanted. Official opposition was also building, with the religious authorities trying to find a way to put Jesus to death. The excitement and the animosity reached their peak in Jerusalem, which became the most dangerous place in the world for Jesus to go.

Yet Jesus set a determined course toward the holy city. His final journey took Him from Galilee into Perea, the district "beyond Jordan" (Matthew 19:1) that was opposite Judea and Samaria and finally into Jerusalem. Jesus knew in advance all the terrible things that were to happen to Him there. He was not caught up helplessly in events beyond His control. He chose to give His life as a ransom for the world, to die in the service of humanity.

As a final lesson on the way, Jesus taught His disciples the value of service (ministering to others). Citizens of the kingdom of Heaven must realize they belong to a community of service, even to the point of giving their lives for the sake of others. (The parallel Gospel account to today's lesson is Mark 10:32-45.)

MASTER'S PLAN (Matthew 20:17-19)

1. Why was this journey to Jerusalem different from all the others (Matthew 20:17)?

The road to *Jerusalem* is a climb in elevation, hence the phrase *going up* (v. 17). Jesus has gone there before, but this time is different. Now He is going there to die for the sins of

mankind. The parallel account in the Gospel of Mark shows Jesus boldly leading the way, with the disciples astonished and fearful (Mark 10:32).

No other city is more appropriate for this trip. The Son of David is going to be put to death in the city that King David had made his capital. The Son of God will die as a sacrifice near the temple of God. At the hands of men, the Son of Man will be put to violent death.

Jesus warned His followers previously that this is going to happen (see Mark 8:31; 9:31). Now He takes *the twelve* apart from the other disciples to give them one last warning. They must understand that the upcoming death on the cross is a necessary part of God's plan.

2. What does Jesus announce will happen to the "Son of man" in Jerusalem (v. 18)?

Jesus' favorite self-designation is *the Son of man*, which occurs about 80 times in the Gospels. This somewhat mysterious designation is drawn from Daniel 7:13, 14: "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom."

Jesus probably uses this phrase because it both reveals and conceals. Those with eyes to see and ears to hear will recognize by this phrase that Jesus is the Messiah. Those whose hearts are hardened can only ask, "Who is this Son of man?" (John 12:34).

After the traveling party arrives in the holy city of Jerusalem, Jesus will be *betrayed*. One of His own disciples will turn against Him. We remember that Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, is present among the 12 disciples as these words are spoken. Jesus already knows, even if Judas does not, that this disciple will turn Him over to the Jewish religious authorities in exchange for 30 pieces of silver.

The chief priests and... *scribes* (Matt. 20:18) represent the authority of the synagogues and the law. Thinking they are acting on behalf of God, these authorities will *condemn Jesus to death*.

3. Why did the Jewish authorities "deliver" Jesus to the Gentiles to be mocked, scourged and crucified?

Under Roman law, the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to put anyone to death. (The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 is an act of mob violence.) For this reason, those leaders have to *deliver him to the Gentiles* so that a death sentence can be carried out (see John 18:28-32).

The Romans had little respect for the Jews and their laws. With pride in the military power of Rome, they especially had little respect for a so-called "king" who seemingly had no power at all. That is why they will *mock* Jesus with the sneering words, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (see Matthew 27:29). They will *scourge* him without mercy. Finally, they will *crucify* Him. Crucifixion is such a slow, horrible death that it is reserved for only the worst of criminals and rebels. Jesus knows exactly what awaits Him at the end of His road.

But Jesus also knows that death will not be the final chapter. He will die; He will lie in the grip of death in a borrowed tomb; but on *the third day*—He will rise *again!* On an earlier occasion when Jesus spoke of rising again, His disciples questioned each other to try to discover what Jesus could possibly mean by the words "rising from the dead" (see Mark 9:10). Although it may be unimaginable and seemingly impossible, but Jesus knows it will happen.

DISCIPLES' PLEA (Matthew 20:20-23)

4. What was the request made by the mother of Zebedee's children (vs. 20, 21)?

Since Jesus had frequently spoken of His coming kingdom, the disciples anticipated that it would arrive soon. However, like many of their contemporaries, the Twelve had a number of misconceptions concerning the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 17:20-21; John 18:33-37; Acts 1:6-7).

The "mother of Zebedee's children" (Matt. 20:20) was Salome (cf. Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25). Of course, Zebedee was the father of James and John (Matt. 4:21). By comparing the names of the women at the cross, Salome was most likely the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This means that James and John were cousins of Jesus. This being so, we can understand why Salome thought that her sons should have privileged positions in Christ's kingdom. In Mark 10:35 only James and John are mentioned regarding this request. This may indicate that they asked their mother to make this request on their behalf.

Since the right and the left hand of a ruler were coveted positions, this was the request made by James and John's mother. The request itself indicates some misunderstanding concerning Christ's mission and kingdom, for it reveals a purely earthly understanding of the Messiah's rule. Nevertheless, since Christ had just spoken of the disciples sitting "upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28) and had given a kingdom parable concerning laborers in the vineyard (20:1-16), we can understand why the request was made at this time.

5. What was Jesus' response to the request made by the mother of Zebedee's children (vs. 22, 23)?

Jesus responds with admirable restraint. Instead of rebuking her and the sons with exasperation and anger, He explains that they have no idea what they are asking. Can they *drink of the cup* from which Jesus will drink? Can they be *baptized with the baptism* that Jesus will experience?

When Jesus spoke of a cup and a baptism, He was speaking metaphorically of His approaching suffering on the cross. Cup is a symbol of the wrath and punishment of God many times in the Old Testament (see Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17; and Jeremiah 25:15-28). Even before the crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:39), they should understand that drinking the cup is a bitter, unpleasant experience. Likewise, to be *baptized* is to be totally engulfed in something. Jesus knows that He will soon be engulfed in a *baptism* of suffering—and it will be suffering that the disciples cannot begin to imagine!

With the kind of confidence that comes from complete ignorance, the disciples answer, *We are able*. Perhaps they suppose that they are ready for anything, since they have persevered with Jesus through three years of ministry. Perhaps they have an unrealistic idea of their own strength. While it is admirable of them to volunteer to face whatever the future holds, it is also naive.

Looking into the years that lie ahead, Jesus assures James and John that they will drink indeed of His cup. They will be engulfed in sufferings far beyond what they can envision. James will be the first apostle to be martyred for his faith, when Herod has him put to death with the sword (see Acts 12:2). John, for his part, will live a long life of service, but will be cast into exile on the Island of Patmos (see Revelation 1:9).

It is not up to Jesus to decide who will sit on His right hand or on His left. Just as the kingdom will be established in the time set by the Father (see Acts 1:7), likewise any positions of authority will be determined by the Father. Just as Jesus cares little for earthly power and

the praise of people, so should the disciples stop jockeying for position and learn the lesson of servanthood.

LESSON OF SERVICE (Matthew 20:24-28)

6 How did the other disciples react to the request of the two brothers(v. 24)?

Upon hearing of the request of James and John, the other disciples "were moved with indignation against the two brethren" (Matt. 20:24). Are we surprised that the other ten are moved with indignation against their two fellow apostles? Are they indignant because they have not had the opportunity to ask first?

The mind-set of the apostles is clearly revealed not many days later when they gather together in the upper room for the Last Supper. Another dispute arises among them as they argue over who will be counted as the greatest (see Luke 22:24). Jesus uses the setting in the upper room to teach a lesson of service. On this later occasion, He will gird himself with a towel and humbly wash their feet (see John 13:3-17). Like most of us today, they are slow to learn the value of servanthood.

7. How did Jesus contrast the Gentile rulers with those who wanted to be His disciples (vs. 25-27)?

As the ten quarrel with the two over who will get seats of power and importance, Jesus calls them over. First, He reminds them of the abuses of power that are usual in the political world of which they know. In the world of the Gentiles, the rulers always take advantage of their power to exercise dominion over their subjects.

The standard abuse of authority by those who climb the ladder to power is not to be the model of the followers of Christ. Instead, whoever has the ambition to be great should become a mere servant (v. 26). To minister to the needs of others is a higher calling than to claim seats of power.

In contrast to the way Rome ruled the world and masters dominated their slaves, Jesus instructed His disciples to take a totally different approach. Christian leadership can be effective only when modeled through service. Those who want to be "great" (Matthew 20:26) and "chief" (vs. 27) in the Master's kingdom must be servants.

To repeat the lesson, Jesus puts His teaching into even stronger terms (v. 28). If anyone wants to be *chief among you*, meaning to be number one above all others, then he is to be *your servant* (literally, "your slave"; 1 Corinthians 9:19; 2 Corinthians 4:5). Such a person's unhealthy craving to be recognized as the greatest is to be replaced with a humble willingness to be the least.

8. How would you respond if you were asked to become a servant to another?

We would probably start by asking for clarification! "*Servant* like a *butler*, or *servant* like a *slave*?" we might ask. Certainly slavery as practiced by the world deserves its horrendous reputation and our condemnation. Oppression is not what Jesus desired.

The attitude Jesus calls us to have is one of humility. An attitude of humility leads us to be willing servants. The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that we are to look out for the interests of others and to consider others more important than ourselves. This God-appointed form of servitude can be very difficult, but it is what is required to be great in the kingdom of God.

9. How was Jesus the ultimate example of service to others during His earthly ministry (v. 28)?

Appropriately, Jesus offers himself as the ultimate example. As *the Son of man*, He did not come to have people serve Him; rather, He came to serve them. He did not demand a palace; rather, He chose a life in which He had nowhere to lay His head (see Matthew 8:20). He did not seek the praise and approval of men nor a life of power and prestige; rather, He chose to be meek and lowly (see Matthew 11:29). He chose a life of service (see 1st paragraph of Lesson Background).

Jesus began these verses by warning His disciples that betrayal and death awaited Him in Jerusalem. Because of an interruption by two disciples and their solicitous mother, Jesus had a great opportunity to teach a lesson about serving others. He concluded this lesson with a return to the beginning fact: He is going to die. In this death He will teach the ultimate lesson of serving others, as the incarnate Son of God takes the place of others and suffers the penalty of death.

10. How was Jesus' life given as a ransom? Why did Jesus use this figure in reference to His death?

Everything Jesus did pointed to the cross. It was there that He gave His life for mankind. Christ's death was not merely martyrdom for a noble cause, either. Jesus gave His life to save sinners from eternal death. It was an atoning sacrifice - a propitiation (1 John 2:2) - necessary to avert the wrath of God against those who "by nature [are] the children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3).

While most of the theology of the Cross is derived from the epistles of the New Testament, the fact that Christ gave His life as a "ransom" (Matt. 20:28) is theologically significant for our understanding of the meaning of the Cross.

In our text, Christ had been speaking of servants, or slaves. Very rarely could a slave extricate himself from his situation. Someone would usually have to redeem him, that is, pay a ransom for his freedom. Similarly, we have been enslaved by Satan, unable to deliver ourselves. However, Christ came so "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

"Jesus *paid* to liberate us from our sin. Of course He paid no one, neither the Father nor the devil. He simply paid. He saved us at the cost of His own life.

CONCLUSION

Service in Its True Beauty

Service in all its true beauty is best seen in the life of Jesus. Even though He had all the power and privileges of Heaven, He emptied himself and came to earth as a man (see Philippians 2:5-8). He had the heart of a servant, gladly humbling himself to serve others. He even lowered himself to the point of dying on a cross between two thieves. His is the life to emulate; His is the mind-set to adopt. If Jesus was willing to leave His position in heaven to be humbled to die on the cross, surely His followers can shed their rights and privileges in order to humble themselves in service to others.

God will reward humble servanthood. He opposes the proud, but He gives grace and approval to the lowly (1 Peter 5:5). He honors the faithful disciple who follows in the steps of Jesus and serves Him (see John 12:26). To those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick and imprisoned, the Lord will say, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

PRAYER

Our Father, how quickly we forget the lessons that Jesus taught us about servanthood! Forgive us when we ignore what You are teaching us and think only of our own advancement. Teach us anew to forsake personal ambition and give our lives serving others. We pray in the name of Jesus, who gave His all, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Embrace servanthood.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "United by the Spirit" and describes the coming of the Holy Ghost upon believers on the Day of Pentecost. Read Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:1-17.

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