

Misguided Ambition and a Question Matthew 20:17-28

This is the story of a mother who wanted only the best for her boys because she loved them, was proud of them and had great dreams for them. She came to Jesus one day with a daring request asking that when Jesus comes into his Kingdom, would he have one seated on his right and the other on his left. She wanted them to have the places of highest honour. No small dreams here.

We live in an ambitious world. We want to know who is the best, fastest, smartest, strongest, loudest, longest, and richest. That's why we watch the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games, the Cricket, the Rugby, the America's Cup and the Netball. That's why some of us might even watch Survivor, Master Chef or Who wants to be a Millionaire. We want to know who is going to get kicked off the island or the show this week and who will last for a few more days. Let's face it. Life is about winning and losing. That's why we keep score. That's why we love sports and competitions. And that's why this mother came to Jesus. In the great game of life, she wanted to make sure her boys came out ahead. If that meant asking for a favour from the Lord, she gladly did it because she felt her boys deserved it. She had big dreams and her sons had large ambitions.

So, what are your ambitions? What do you dream about?

What are your secret hopes for your own life?

This story of ambition takes place about a week before the crucifixion as Jesus and his disciples are journeying toward Jerusalem. These are the final action-packed days as the clock ticks down toward the climax of Jesus' public ministry. While Jesus is coming to grips with the gruesome death that looms before him, ...his disciples are aiming for better seats in the Kingdom.

And who can blame them? Human nature has it that everyone wants to be somebody - even near the centre of power. And we say or at least we think, "If I can't be somebody, let me be near someone who is somebody." That way we can soak up their greatness. Imagine getting to sit beside Jacinda on the front bench in Parliament, "Let's do this" or called into the front seat of the helicopter that Richie MaCaw is piloting or being with the Queen for High tea at Buckingham Palace. That's a High ambition!

I. High Ambition vv20-21 While it is easy to criticise this woman, in reality is she was doing what any mother would do. I can't blame her for coming to Jesus. My child does not want to be

in goal, not even a defender, they are a striker, a goal scorer, so put them up front coach or let them open the batting together.

Perhaps the mother is involved because they all agreed that Jesus would be more sympathetic if the request came from her first. So she kneels humbly before Jesus and asks with great respect that James and John be given the seats of highest honour in the Kingdom. At this point we come up against a danger all parents face. It's easy to want our children to fulfill our dreams instead of God's for them. Often we try to force our children into a mold of our own choosing so that we can live vicariously through them. Let every grand/parent ponder this truth: Your desires and God's desire for your children may not be the same.

So why shouldn't she ask that her boys have the seats of highest honour? Why shouldn't they have the place of power, prestige and intimacy? After all, someone has to sit on Jesus' right and on his left. It might as well be James and John. And it couldn't hurt to ask in advance. The basic problem though is that James and John underestimated the cost of following Christ and they overestimated their own importance. They didn't ask for work in the coming Kingdom which would have been a nobler request. They asked only for a place of honour. Seniority was their plea. 'We've been here longer than anyone except Peter!' And they probably thought the Kingdom was coming soon so they wanted to get their applications in early. They wanted an early decision by Jesus... What will Jesus say to their brash request?

II. High Cost vv22-23

Jesus doesn't rebuke the mother or her sons. And he doesn't deny his coming Kingdom or that there will be seats of honour. Leaving aside selfish motives for a moment, there is nothing wrong with the question per se. Jesus simply tells them that they don't know what they are asking for. Then he asks the men if they can drink the cup he is about to drink. With real bravery, they reply, "We can." Very confident they are—brave and honest and.... not very smart.

Sometimes our perspective gets a bit out of whack and we forget our limitations. Muhammed Ali was on a plane and the stewardess asked him to buckle his seat belt. He said to her, "Superman don't need no seat-belt." The stewardess quickly answered, "Superman don't need no airplane either."

Jesus doesn't turn them down and he doesn't put them down. He doesn't say, "Forget about it. You'll never have a place of honour." Not at all. He merely raises the bar. "You want to sit next to me? Fine. Here's what it will cost you." Remember this: be careful when you pray because you might just get what you ask for! James and John assumed their suffering was over and their work was done. They were wrong on both counts. Their suffering was still ahead of them and their work was just starting. For the concept of the "cup" in the Bible speaks of an intense personal experience.

Or to put it another way - **Long Hours, Hard Work, Low Pay**

In the verses 17-19 Jesus explained to his disciples that when he goes to Jerusalem, he would be betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and ultimately crucified. Nothing that happened was hidden to him. He went to Jerusalem with full knowledge of what was about to happen. When Jesus challenged James and John to join with him in drinking the cup, he is calling them to suffer in his name. Only he could pay for the sins of the world, but they could suffer with him by being faithful to him. This was what the apostles had to look forward to if they truly wanted to follow Christ. And that is exactly what happened. James was the first to die having his head cut off. John was the last to die living in exile on an island. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "I admire your bravery, and I will reward you by making you bookends for the apostles. One will die first, the other will die last."

When Jesus said, "Can you drink the cup I am about to drink?" he was inviting them to come and die with him. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who died in a Nazi prison shortly before the end of World War II, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." ...Here we come to the bottom line of life. Are you willing to sacrifice everything that is dear to you in order to follow Christ? If the answer is yes, then you can also share in the rewards. These are not words to toss around lightly. You only make this kind of commitment when you have found something worth giving your life for... 10pm 25 Dec 1991!

III. High Standard 24-28 (Jesus is Lord - Lord of High Standards)

When the other disciples heard about this, they were outraged with the two brothers. Now the disciples started to argue among themselves, which shouldn't surprise us. I'm sure the ten are angry with James and John for going to Jesus when they wished they had thought of it first. The whole episode begins with the strange

request by the mother of James and John and ends with a heated dispute. It's all perfectly natural because we humans are born to compete, especially guys to fight for the top spot, to look out for number one. Winning and losing is what life is all about. So, before we condemn the disciples, we each can take a look in the mirror.

Once again Jesus doesn't condemn. He uses this as a "teachable moment" to challenge them to channel their ambition in a brand-new direction. Ambition has become something of a dirty word in our day because for many people it implies an overwhelming desire for personal advancement regardless of the cost—and regardless of who is hurt in the process. Let's face it. There is entirely too much of that kind of ambition in the world. In every company or office or factory and in every school and team, you can always find a few people who are willing to step on or over anyone if it will help them climb the ladder. Jesus knew all about men and women like that. And he understood that his followers would be tempted to use the same tactics. With four simple words he radically broke with that kind of ambition: "*Not so with you.*" Then he paints an entirely different picture of ambition. "Do you want to be a leader? That's great because the world needs good leaders. Here's what I want you to do. Become a servant. Pick up a towel and start washing dirty feet. Think of yourself as a slave and not as a master." In saying what he did, Jesus completely rejects the world's way of doing business. Instead of using people, we serve them to the point of being a humble slave ourselves.

These words of Jesus go to the source of leadership. True authority arises out of servanthood. Jesus accepts the premise that ambition can be good and godly... It's the pathway that is different. It's a good thing to want to lead—if you want to lead Jesus' way. A real leader asks how they can serve the needs of others. He does what needs to be done without making a big deal about it.

So. Would you like to be a leader? Then: Be a servant- Be a slave. Then go to the head of the class. Napoleon Bonaparte captured an important truth when he declared: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded empires; but upon what do these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded his empire upon love; and to this very day millions would die for him." It is entirely true. Out of love he came to serve others, and after 2000 years millions would and have gladly died for him.

[Christianity in One Verse] Verse 28 summarizes the whole Christian message. This is Christianity in one verse. Here we are told several powerful truths: Jesus came to serve us so that we can serve others. He is the ultimate servant and he is not only our example, he is also our servant.

The final phrase of verse 28 brings us to the very heart of the gospel. Christ gave “his life as a ransom for many.” The word “ransom” refers to the price paid to redeem a slave or a prisoner. It speaks of our despicable condition because of sin. That price was paid to God to satisfy divine justice so that our punishment might be averted. It cost Christ his very life offered up in a bloody sacrifice on the cross. Christ the innocent suffered in the place of the guilty so that by his perfect life and his bloody death he might pay the price of our sin, turning away God’s wrath, so that we might be set free. He took the divine punishment meant for us. He died for “all” but only the “many” who are called will respond in true saving faith. Suppose you ask, Am I included in the “many?” Is there room for me? Thank God, the answer is always yes. You are in the “many” if you come by faith to him. No one who comes to Christ in simple saving faith will ever be turned away.

Let us learn from this that the road to heaven always goes by way of the cross. If you skip the cross, you’ll end up missing heaven too. I close with the question Christ asked these two eager apostles:

“Are you able?”

This is the question the Lord asks each one of us today.

Are you able to drink the cup of suffering?

Are you able to follow Jesus to the cross?

Are you willing to follow God’s plan for your life no matter what it takes and no matter where it leads?

Are you willing to serve instead of rule?

Are you willing to serve before you rule?

Are you willing to serve as you rule?

In the end our greatest need is Jesus. It always comes back to him, doesn’t it? We are called to follow him even when his steps lead us to the cross. We are helpless without him.

But in him all things are possible.

Are you able? What is your answer?