



Matthew 20:20-28
Practicing The Way
“Service”

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Pray. This morning we continue the sermon series we began in early January, looking at the spiritual practices, or disciplines, of Jesus. In this series we have looked at:

1. **Sabbath**
2. **Prayer**
3. **Fasting**
4. **Solitude**
5. **Generosity** (Simplicity - we got 2 for the price of 1 this week!)
6. **Scripture**
7. **Community**

And today is “Service.” The idea of serving others is something that is not very well emphasized or appreciated in the world today. Helping people who are less fortunate, freely giving of one’s time to bless our communities, taking the step down from a position of power to serve and empower others rather than taking the step up to control and dictate to others...this kind of approach to people is almost completely lost today.

This is not a new phenomenon. The human tendency is to look out for oneself, and not for others...but that only breeds division, contempt, envy, and more. So, how do we get past this problem? Let’s see what Jesus has to say about this, though we start with an acknowledgment that it’s been a problem for a long time. (**Matthew 20:20-21**)...

This is from nearly 2,000 years ago, and it isn’t even the first instance of someone seeking positions of power and influence. This the very first thing Matthew relates to us after Jesus predicts his death for the third time here in the Gospel According to Matthew. Jesus is with his disciples, on the way to Jerusalem for the final time. And Jesus says he’ll be handed over to the leaders, he’ll be condemned to death, he’ll be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and that on the third day he will be raised to life.

And the mother of James and John, who is probably named Salome, a woman who is mentioned a few times in the gospels...she comes and asks this question about giving positions of power to her sons in Jesus' kingdom. Now, credit her, and perhaps her sons as well, for believing Jesus is going to be ruling over a kingdom someday, even though he has told them multiple times he's going to die an unpleasant death at the hands of his detractors.

But let's *also* acknowledge this for what it is, and there are two things I want to briefly point out. **First, this is some serious "helicopter parenting," nearly 2,000 years prior to the term being invented.** James and John were probably in their early 20's at this point, or late teens at the youngest – and mom is swooping in with this request. Can you imagine a parent doing that for their 20 year old today – like going to a potential employer and asking for a job offer for a son? I don't know...maybe there's a cultural thing in their day that made this ok, but it seems odd to us, for sure. That being said, the two of them are in on the plan, because Jesus initially answers her request by addressing *them*, and not her, as we'll see in a moment.

Second, the request also seems to reflect a misunderstanding of Jesus' kingdom, believing it's going to be an earthly one. Maybe they understood his kingdom was not of this earth...but probably the request would not have been made, had they realized that being at his right and left hands meant dying first. So, in all likelihood, the assumption is that this is an earthly kingdom, which was the common expectation of the Messiah in their day.

But in the request, we see this desire for position, power, and influence: To be second and third in command in Jesus' kingdom. So, the quest for position, power, and influence is not new today. It wasn't new in their day, even. But it does continue to be a problem today. Let's continue reading, with the next couple verses (**Matthew 20:22-23**).

Jesus' response about drinking the cup he's going to drink is a metaphor for the suffering unto death he's going to endure. Jesus uses the same metaphor in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane just a bit later. Now, James and John *do* drink from the same or very similar cup as Jesus. James is martyred by King Herod a few years later, as Acts 12:2 tells us. And John

was exiled by the Roman Government, sent to the island of Patmos as we know from Revelation 1:9. So, yes, they drank the cup that Jesus drank from, as Jesus said they would. But to be at his right or left hand: that's not Jesus' call to make. That's being handled by his heavenly father. Let's read the next couple verses (**Mark 20:24-25**):

So: Verse 24 illustrates for us one of the dangers of seeking or being in positions of power, and authority: If not done right, it can break unity and relationships. It can break trust. It can destroy teams. Now it doesn't *have* to be that way, and teams, organizations, nations, companies, churches, schools...they all need people in positions of leadership with authority where they can influence the culture of the organization, shape the team, and lead them to live into the organization's mission. But there's a right and wrong way to do that. James and John are seeking to go about it the wrong way. In fact, they're not even in the positions; they're just *desiring* the positions, and they're going about *that* the wrong way.

Before Jesus gets to the solution, he highlights the problem, using the rulers of the Gentiles and how they go about doing their job as exhibit "A". In verse 25 he says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them [meaning, the Gentile people], and their high officials exercise authority over them." Jesus uses strong language here that has negative connotations about leadership and authority. He could have used more positive, or at least neutral, words. Instead he uses "katakuriuo" which is a strong word that means "dominate" and he uses "katexousiazō" for "authority".

"Katexousiazō" (kata=down; exousiazō=power/authority) carries the idea of oppressive, domineering authority. So, the problem is using power and position to exercise this domineering authority. They know about this kind from the governing officials of the Gentiles. Now comes the solution: **Matthew 20:26-28**).

Jesus says in verse 26, "That's not how you're to be." Full stop: don't exercise authority or influence in that manner. Don't "lord it over" people, don't domineer, don't bully, oppress, dictate, coerce, manipulate or anything else along those lines. That is *not* how followers of Jesus are to treat,

influence, lead, or shape other people, no matter what your position in life may be, or theirs.

If you want to lead, if you want to influence, if you want to positively impact people and your church, your community, or your country – **Jesus puts it like this in verses 26 and 27: if you want to be “great” and want to be “first” – then you have to become a servant.** This is the defining characteristic and lifestyle that Jesus is seeking to cultivate in his disciples. And notice, it’s not “volunteers” Jesus cultivating – it’s servants. There’s a difference. And the approach James and John take as their mom flies the helicopter in to make their request is not the right approach. Jesus want us to put other people’s needs, hurts, and well-being before our own: help them, teach them, pray for them, sacrifice for them, give them a hand up, and simply be with them.

This is what Jesus did, and highlighting his example is how he ends his teaching on the subject here. **“For the son of man [that’s Jesus!] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).** In other words: he is our model for how to serve, how to gain influence and authority in people’s lives. Think about it: All he did was serve, and 2.5 billion people follow him today (largest religion), and about 8-9 billion have followed throughout history. You think service can lead to influence? The statistics based on Jesus’ life of service say, “yes.”

Now, the ultimate act of service Jesus gives is his death on the cross. The good news is, most people are not usually called to serve to that degree. **Most of the acts of service you and I are called to are more repeatable.** Jesus modeled them for us as well. For instance: Jesus taught the uneducated, he mentored future leaders, he healed the sick, fed the hungry, acknowledged the marginalized, touched the untouchable, befriended the friendless, washed the dirty, cried with the grieving, forgave sinners, prayed for the needy, gave hope to the hopeless, restored the broken...and more. He practiced serving others *all the time*. He embodied it. It was his lifestyle – literally where he lived, worked, and played. I think he stole our church’s vision statement! 😂

And he is saying *that* is how Christians are to have influence, power, and authority. It's not about top down, positional power, dictating to people what to do. It's about *lowering* oneself (takes humility!) to serve others.

Essentially, Jesus completely upends the world's approach to power, authority, leadership, and influence: the way to do that well is not by controlling people, it's by serving people.

This is the solution to the problem of power. So, what does this mean for us? It means you and I are called to a life of service. Discipleship to Jesus is not only about what it does *for* you. It *does* do something for you – Jesus offers you salvation from your sin and the hope of eternal life in his kingdom (praise God for that!) – but your salvation is not the end game. You don't get saved through faith in Jesus and then live in spiritual retirement. You are saved for a purpose: serving others.

So, how does this look here at Rose Hill, and probably somewhat similarly in most churches? Well: **It starts with being engaged in worship on Sundays – in person if possible.** Online worship is great, but it's a last resort. When you're here and engaged in worship, it's a form of service. First, it's a service to God, as you praise to him and live into your commitment to follow Jesus; but being in worship is also service to other people because your very presence and active participation in the worship encourages others to do the same.

For instance, when you sing, it encourages others to do the same –especially if you *don't* sing well because those who do sing well want to drown out your voice. So, if you don't sing well – sing loudly...and if you *do* sing well, then sing even louder! When you lift your hands in praise or bow your head in prayer, it encourages others to do the same. You also encourage others in their journey of faith when you stay awake in the sermon, greet one another – especially people who are new to Rose Hill and maybe new to the Christian faith – and when you chat over a cup of coffee in the lobby, and more. All of that is a kind of service because you are encouraging others in their faith and to be involved in the life of the church. I can't overstate the importance of being in church on Sunday mornings and actively engaging in worship. We call it a worship service; and you serve when you worship.

Second, is getting yourself equipped to serve (discipleship). Personal devotions, small group Bible studies, and all the spiritual practices we've covered in this series...praying, sabbathing, solitude, fasting, generosity, scripture reading, community...all these kinds of things equip us and shape us to be like Jesus. But here's the catch: **Discipleship endeavors/ministries for spiritual growth are *not* an end to themselves; they are a step on the path to following Jesus.** I can't state that strongly enough. Write that down. Photograph it. Go get it tattooed on your forearm today. (I'm just kidding... today's the Sabbath, so do it tomorrow 😊.) Too many Christians get stuck in this place of discipleship – often lost in trivial theological issues that Jesus barely discusses – and their discipleship doesn't actually lead them anywhere; it just goes in circles. But the point of discipleship ministries and spiritual practices is to be more like Jesus. Our discipleship leads us: not in a circle, but *forward* along the path of following Jesus, so we would be more Christ-like.

The third step is serving...which really is just living as Jesus lived. (And we still stay engaged with the first two steps, btw...this isn't a progression where you leave one step behind as you move along.) Jesus didn't come to be served, as he says in today's passage, and the path of discipleship doesn't lead to being served, either. "Being served" as a lifestyle is just spiritual consumerism, and Jesus has *nothing* to do with that. Now, sometimes, we need people to come alongside us and help us or serve us in our time of need. That's fine. That's part of the reason we need other Christians in our lives – we need community as Rob preached on last week. Even Jesus was served on occasion: He was baptized, served meals, experienced hospitality, and was anointed with oil. But the norm, given that we're able, and based on the life of Jesus, is that we serve others. If you struggle with that and find yourself saying "But I don't want to serve," then you are probably glossing over step two of discipleship and your life isn't really ordered around Jesus, but something else. Or maybe it's back in step one, and your worship isn't genuine because you don't realize the depth of your sin and the greatness of God's grace to save you from it. When you recognize that, and engage in some discipleship practices to deepen your faith, serving is a natural outcome rooted in gratitude and done with joy because of what God has done for us.

So, how are you serving? I ask myself this question as well, because I'm not perfect at it. But I'm called to share the gospel of Jesus, and part of this is that a life with purpose and meaning is found in serving others. Certainly, serving in the church is a place to start. There are tons of opportunities on Sundays to do this beyond what I mentioned earlier that we all do by actively participating in worship. There are specific service opportunity roles – from serving as a greeter at the front doors to leading worship music to teaching Bible lessons to kids, teen, or adults to running the computer that projects on the screen or the video cameras so people who can't be here can watch online or running the sound board or setting up coffee and food to counting the offering after worship. I'm probably forgetting something...but when you count all the people who lead on Sundays, it's like 30-35 who serve, and some of them serve in multiple ways.

And then there are opportunities to serve outside of Sunday mornings as well...and I'm not going to cover all of them, but our Elders and Deacons are two significant ways, there are people who lead Bible studies during the week, help with processing all-church mailings like our monthly newsletter, people who visit the homebound or folks in hospitals...Saturday work parties, maintaining our website, keeping in contact with our missionaries around the globe...The opportunities to serve are plentiful. That's all within the framework of the church.

Beyond that, God undoubtedly gives you opportunities to serve others out in the community or at your place of work or whatever...all the way from holding the door open for others at the coffee shop to bringing a meal to a sick neighbor to praying for your co-worker who just got the pink slip. But the point is: **Serving others is what you were made for, because that's what Jesus did.**

He didn't come to be served, but to serve...no "lording it over others" and no "domineering authority"...and he served all the way to the cross, which is the closest thing to a king's throne he ever sat on when he walked the earth. Christians would do well to remember that we have only one king who rules in our lives, and his name is Jesus, his kingdom is not of this earth, and

anyone else who claims to be a king in our lives is an imposter. And from that posture of service, he's had more influence and power than anyone who's ever walked the face of the earth. And *that* is how Jesus' disciples are called to be, as well; The ball is now in our court, and our hands. So, let's serve. Let's pray...Amen.