

Death and Dishonour – Matthew 20:17-28

Introduction

Last week's talk was bookended by the one saying said forwards and backwards.

Matthew 19:30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

In between these two sayings, Jesus told the parable of a vineyard owner who gave all of his workers the same wages for working in his field, no matter whether they worked for an hour or a day. It was a strange parable as it spoke a lot about God's generosity, but it also spoke about the disciples' jealousy. They were the first of Jesus' followers, the most important you might say, because they were going to have the great responsibility of starting the church as Jesus' apostles. But as important as they would become, they had to learn humility. They had to learn that God's Kingdom is not about seeking power for yourself, but to use power for God's glory and for the benefit of others. They had to learn to put themselves last as they served God and served others. But while the parable of the vineyard owner began to show them these things, they still had a lot to learn. You could imagine them thinking, "What does Jesus mean when he says that the first will be last and the last will be first? What would it look like in real life? I believe that Matthew deliberately put all these stories together, going all the way back to the beginning of chapter 18, so that we can learn the important lesson of the first being last and the last being first. A lesson in humility. The next two stories, which we are looking at today, are a lesson in what the "first being last" looks like, and what it does not look like.

Jesus' Prophecy

Jesus told his disciples exactly what was going to happen in the next couple of weeks. They were heading to Jerusalem, where Jesus would be betrayed and arrested, and then handed over to the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders would condemn Jesus to death, but they would not commit the act of executing him. No, they would hand him over to the Gentiles so that they could do that. Jesus said that he would be mocked, flogged, and crucified. Normally, a person might get one of those three things, but not all three. Crucifixion was seen as a curse by the Jews, and the most humiliating form of execution by the Romans. Jesus spoke of his own humiliation and demise throughout his prophecy.

Who is Jesus?

Now, we know the story of Jesus' crucifixion, so we know how it ends, but at this stage, the disciples still had a lot to learn. But it is worth thinking about who Jesus is before we look at the thought of Jesus' demise. The very first verse of Matthew' Gospel says...

Matthew 1:1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham

From the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we read of Jesus being a true son of Israel, a true son of Abraham. Jesus is one of God's chosen people. But Jesus is not only one of God's chosen people, he is also a son of David, which means that he is of royal blood. More than that, Jesus is called "the Messiah", the King of God's Kingdom, the most important and powerful person of God's Kingdom. Throughout this Gospel we have seen Jesus demonstrate his power by controlling nature, by healing the sick, by defeating demons, and by

raising people from the dead. There is no human being who has more power or authority than Jesus! But notice, in verse 18, that Jesus called himself the Son of Man. Yes, that does mean that he was a human being, but it also points us back to the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7. The Son of Man entered God's throne room and ruled over God's Kingdom, ultimately judging the earth. But only God can do these things, so the Son of Man is actually a godlike figure. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, walked the earth with all the power and authority of God in his fingertips. There is no one more powerful than Jesus. So, why would Jesus allow himself to be betrayed, condemned, mocked, flogged, and crucified? There is only one answer. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

The First becomes the Last

By making himself the least of all, Jesus would be able to bring glory to God, and salvation to all who trust in him, by defeating the power of death. Notice at the end of verse 19, it says that Jesus would be raised to life on the third day. Jesus could only be raised to life if he had died. But Jesus' death was no accidental death. It was a purposeful sacrifice which needed to happen so that sin and death could be destroyed when God's eternal Kingdom finally comes. So, the victory that Jesus had over death was not really for his own glory, the victory brought glory to God because God would now be able to bring his people into his Kingdom through Jesus' saving works. More than that, Jesus' victory over death promises us victory over death, which means that Jesus died for our benefit, not for his.

By placing this prophecy immediately after "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" saying, we are seeing Jesus give the prime example of what that saying means. The most powerful being in all the universe did not use his power for himself, he used his power to glorify God and to bring salvation to others. Jesus, "the first", made himself "the last", and brought the love of God and the salvation he offers to us all.

Mummy's Boys

But human beings can be really thick. We just don't get it, even when it is right in front of our eyes. The next story is of the disciples continued search for power. James and John were still thinking about who the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven might be. Remember back at the beginning of chapter 18, when the disciples asked Jesus about who the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven was? Jesus then told them that they needed to be like a child, and to have the humility of a child. They needed to think of themselves as being the least in the Kingdom, not the most powerful. Now, in chapter 20, they started acting like children, and got their mum to speak for them. This is immature, childish behaviour. It is not what Jesus meant when he said...

Matthew 18:4 *Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

The lowly position of a child is all about having humility. It is not about getting your mum to ask for favours for you. But their mum said to Jesus...

Matthew 20:21 *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."*

This is a grab for power. They know the end was coming soon, and they had not listened to Jesus' description of his death, all they could think of was getting a share in Jesus' power and authority. Notice that Jesus did not answer the mum, he answered her sons. After all, it was really their question. James and John were standing behind their mum like cowards, not looking very authoritative or powerful, but hoping to get a share of that power and authority as they stood hiding behind their mum.

Matthew 20:22 *"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.*

Sure, they can drink it if it is the cup of wealth and power, but we know that Jesus was not talking about a cup of wealth and power, Jesus was talking about the cup of death. They too would drink from the poison chalice of suffering and death, but not while Jesus was being crucified.

Upside Down Kingdom

Notice how the other disciples took to the news of James and John's grab for power...

Matthew 20:24 *When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.*

They were angry! They were outraged! James and John had got there first. They were the first to ask for power and authority, and if they got that power and authority, then they would be in charge over the other disciples. It was a race to the top, and no one liked being beaten or thrown down. They all wanted power, and they would climb over each other to get it. But that is the way of the world! Survival of the strongest! The constant battle to be above all! To find power and be the first to grab it! But that is not the way of God's Kingdom.

Matthew 20:25-28 *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."*

Jesus spelled it out for them again. The rulers of this world often look for power, and when they have got it, they use it to keep their power. One of the problems with power is worrying about when someone will come and take it off you. So, the worldly way is to use your power for your own benefit and not for the good of others. Again, Jesus used himself as the example. The Promised King of God's Kingdom, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the most powerful being in the universe, God himself, did not come to make everyone on earth his servants. Jesus did not come to lord it over us, or to make us his slaves, that is the kind of things we see in the myths and legends. No, Jesus came in love to serve his people and bring salvation to them. What we see here is Jesus explaining the idea of the "first shall be last, and the last shall be first". It is not about being the most powerful, the most important, the one with the most authority. It is not about living for your own benefit and using all the responsibility God gives you for yourself. Living in the Kingdom means that we look at power and authority in a very different way to the world.

Christians and Power

One of the problems with how people understand this passage is that they can think that Christians are not supposed to have any power or authority. Jesus told us to be slaves, servants, to have the humility of a

child, and some believe that means that we have to give up any thought of having authority or power. So, according to this thinking, we should not be in politics, law, or big business. We should steer clear of the military and the police. Any position which has a lot of power and authority attached to it should be avoided because as Christians we should always be trying to be in the servant class, the least of all, the childlike position. But I do not think that is what Jesus means at all. After all, the disciples would have great power and authority in their ministry. They too would do miracles and demonstrate power and authority over sickness, disease, and demons. The words they spoke had the power to bring people eternal life. And they had the responsibility of establishing God's church in the world. So, Jesus was not saying that they had to abandon all forms of authority and power, Jesus was teaching them how they were to use their authority and power.

It is no different for us today. Some of us will have little power, we might not even be able to look after ourselves properly, let alone have authority over others. Other Christians will have great amounts of responsibility which means that they will have authority and power over vast amounts of people. So, it does not matter whether you have large responsibilities or small ones, the principles are meant to be the same.

Jesus used his great power to glorify God and bring salvation to God's people. He did this by being servant hearted. Jesus sacrificed himself, so that people could be saved. That is what it means when it says that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. We too need to be servant hearted. If, and when, we have any kind of power and authority, then we need to use that power and authority in the right way. It must not be for our benefit, getting all that we want at the expense of others. No, we serve others out of love for God and love for others. That is how we glorify God. And the greatest act of service we can give is to help people come to Jesus so that they can know the salvation he offers them. After all, Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many.