

+ Matthew 20:17-28 + How the Selfish Became Selfless + 4th Sunday in Lent + 30 March 2014 +

“You don’t know what you are asking...” – Words that make you cringe. It’s how you felt when you did something really foolish, but never realized how foolish it was until your parents busted you—and all you could do was cringe. That’s how James and John and their mother must’ve felt when Jesus spoke those words. To be honest, that’s how this whole account from Matthew 20 makes us feel today. You just want to cringe when you read it.

Jesus was **“going up to Jerusalem”** and he knew why he was going. His disciples weren’t so clear about it. So Jesus pulled the Twelve aside and told them in as clear and straightforward a way as possible. **“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!”** “Brothers, some awful things are going to happen in the coming days. I’ve already told you this twice, but in case you forgot or didn’t understand, I’m going to be betrayed. I’m going to be condemned. I’m going to be tortured and crucified. I’m going to die, but three days after I die, I am going to rise from the dead!”

Jesus had very clearly shared these important words with his disciples at least two other times before going to Jerusalem. Previously, his disciples had reacted with shock and disbelief. Peter even tried to convince Jesus that this “plan” wasn’t such a good idea, but this time? It’s like Jesus’ words went in one ear and out the other. As Jesus and his disciples neared Jerusalem, the pilgrim crowds had grown bigger and bigger. There was a sense that they were traveling with the long-promised King who was going to take his kingdom back from the Roman oppressors. They completely ignored the real reason why Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem.

Their ignorance at the obvious makes you cringe, but it gets worse. Two disciples definitely weren’t listening to what he had to say. The sons of Zebedee—James and John—well-known for their impulsive thinking, figured that now was the best time to approach Jesus about those important positions in his new kingdom. They were getting close to Jerusalem and they were two of Jesus’ closest disciples. They had their eye on the top two spots as his closest advisors with the most authority, but how were they going to approach Jesus to ask?

The brothers came up with a plan that to them made a lot of sense. “Let’s ask Mom!” Their mother was along for the trip from Galilee to Jerusalem as a follower of Jesus. She loved her boys and wanted them to get ahead. Plus they knew Jesus had a tender heart and rarely turned down a humble request. So it didn’t take much to convince mom to do their dirty work.

“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.” Mom replied, **“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom.”** The request would’ve made sense if Jesus was going up to take the earthly throne of his father David, but that wasn’t his purpose. Imagine the confusion on their faces when Jesus said, **“You don’t know what you are asking...”**

Their impulsive foolishness had gotten the better of them. Yet Jesus didn’t criticize or yell at them for their foolishness. Instead he asked, **“Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”** James and John and their mother had failed to listen when Jesus spoke about his real reason for going to Jerusalem. They never realized what Jesus meant by **“the cup”**. They couldn’t imagine what kind of suffering and torture and death he was about to endure. So the brothers tried to be bold about it. **“We can.”**

With unbelievable patience, Jesus told 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.”** The brothers would drink of Jesus’ **“cup”**. James would be beheaded some years later and John would suffer greatly over the next 70 years, but Jesus’ answer to their request was a firm “No”. He wasn’t going to rule an earthly kingdom and their request was just selfish foolishness.

Such selfish behavior just makes you cringe, but there’s even more. You see, the other ten disciples got word of this. Matthew—one of those ten—tells us, **“When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.”** Now before you commend them for their righteousness, recall that these same disciples had recently argued over who was **“the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”**. Rather than being angry at the selfishness of James and John, the other ten were ticked off because they didn’t think of doing it first. Peter and Andrew, Nathaniel and Philip, Matthew and Judas all wished that they had brought their mothers along too.

None of the ten had heard Jesus' cringeworthy response, and all had clearly forgotten what Jesus had told them moments before. They still had their selfish hearts set on jockeying for the best positions in Christ's earthly kingdom. Being the all-knowing God, Jesus knew what was in their hearts. He could've disciplined them harshly. They certainly had it coming, but instead **"Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (Oof!), and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. (Ouch!)"** Jesus compared their selfish grab for power that didn't exist with that of the pagans who did not know the true God or his Word, who had no hesitation lording it over others and crushing everyone in their way. **"Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 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."** Instead of being a lord, be a servant. Instead of being a master, be a slave. The final statement made them cringe the most, because their selfish ways were not their Lord's selfless ways.

Reading this account really does make you cringe. Is it because you feel bad for James and John and the other disciples? You might. Is it because you know how it feels to get caught for doing something wrong that you thought was actually okay? You might. Yet isn't it true that deep down what really makes you cringe at this portion of God's Word is the fact that you have been as selfish and foolish as James and John and the other disciples?

Are you and I really any different than Zebedee's sons? To what extent will you go to get what you want, to do what you want, to go where you want? That sinful nature inside of you is so selfish, so wicked that it doesn't care who you involve or what corners you cut or how much time you waste thinking about how you can get what you want. All that matters is that you get it. The end justifies the means, but the end never seems to satisfy. You devote your life to getting what you want, but never want what you get.

Are you and I any different than the other ten disciples? How easily angered you get when someone does whatever it takes with no moral qualms to get that job, that car, that house, that guy or girl, that toy, that stuff, when in reality you're jealous. You're indignant. You secretly kick yourself because "Why didn't I think of that?" We are that selfish, aren't we?

Jesus' response to your selfishness and mine is just as painful, just as cringeworthy as it was for James and John and the ten. **"You don't know what you're asking..."** (Oof!) Jesus' quiet discipline cuts more than if he had thundered against us. **"Not so with you."** (Ouch!) With just a few words, he basically asks, "Who do you think you are to make such a self-centered demand of the holy God? What right do you have to **"be indignant"**?" What do you really deserve because clearly I should not see such selfishness among you who are supposed to be my children by faith?"

...And we cringe waiting for God's judgment to fall, but this account isn't just cringeworthy. Yes, like a patient parent, Jesus quietly disciplines his disciples and you and me, but remember when and where we are in the life of Jesus! He is on his way **"up to Jerusalem"** on a journey that started with a moment of glory on a mountain and will end with undeserved suffering and humiliation and death. Jesus knew why he was heading up to Jerusalem. That's why he gave a play-by-play account of what was going to happen to him. He was going to be betrayed. He was going to be condemned. He was going to be tortured and mocked and crucified and killed, but he was going to rise from the dead. Jesus had no illusions about **"the cup"** he was going to drink, because he had a purpose to fulfill in Jerusalem.

What's even more remarkable was that he was **"going up to Jerusalem"** to serve. **"...The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** Jesus was going to Jerusalem to selflessly serve on behalf of every sinner, even you and me. You see, as selfish to the core as every one of us is by nature, Jesus was even more selfless. By perfectly submitting to God's holy will, Jesus selflessly served in your place. He didn't have to do that. You and I certainly didn't deserve it, but he submitted to his own holy Law for you and me and every one of us. By suffering all the mockery and opposition and hatred and torture of our sinful world and from our sinful hearts, Jesus selflessly served to rescue you from the suffering of hell. He didn't have to endure any of that. He certainly didn't deserve it, yet he endured it for you and me and every one of us. By dying on the cross, Jesus selflessly served as the sacrifice that brings forgiveness for every one of your sins. He never sinned and therefore never deserved death, yet he died for you and me and every one of us. By rising from the dead, Jesus selflessly served by conquering death, by guaranteeing your forgiveness, and by opening up the gates of heaven forever. We certainly didn't deserve that, yet he still rose from the dead for you and me and every one of us. **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

So how do you respond? ***“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”*** You and I, though we are selfish by nature, can respond with selfless thanks through faith in Christ Jesus. Like Jesus, true greatness is found when you put yourself at the service of another, when you see yourself not in a “me first” kind of way, but in an “I am third” kind of way—Jesus first, others second, I am third. Like Jesus, true greatness is found when you devote and commit your life to serving others, not yourself. In that way, you become a ***“servant”*** and a ***“slave”*** of Christ. The selfless service of Jesus becomes your motivation to serve and your model for service, because in serving you he paid the full ransom for your sins and mine. That’s how the selfish become selfless. May our selfless Lord give us selfless hearts to serve him now and to eternity. Amen.