**THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE**

March 17, 2019

Matthew 20:17-34

Key Verse 20:28 “…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.”

Last week there was a massive scandal in college admissions. A well-known actress Felicity Huffman and others bribed, or even photoshopped their children’s faces onto stock photos of athletes to help them get in sports teams at elite schools such as Yale, Stanford and University of Southern California even though they don’t know how to play sports such as soccer. Parents spent anywhere from $200,000 to $6.5 million to guarantee their children’s admission. It is understandable from parents’ point of view because they want the best for their children. However, it comes from the false belief that if you graduate from elite schools, your life will be on an easy road to greatness. In today’s passage we meet a woman who had the same idea 2000 years ago. She was the mother of James and John. She asked Jesus of a special favor for her children to be the greatest in his kingdom based on a family connection. Jesus teaches them and us that those who want to be truly great must be servants of all. Jesus himself showed an example by serving others and by giving his life as a ransom for many.

**First**, Jesus again predicts his death and resurrection (17-19). Look at verses 17b-19. “…he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ‘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!’” He had already told them twice concerning his upcoming death and resurrection. The first time was right after Peter’s confession of Christ. (16:21) The second time was after healing a boy with a demon. (17:22,23) Here Jesus adds a detail that he would be crucified. His death would be the most painful and most shameful. The death of Jesus Christ is the primary event in history and also the primary event in the Bible. As someone has said, it is the scarlet thread woven through the whole Bible. It goes back all the way to Genesis chapter 3 when Adam and Eve sinned against God. When they sinned against God, they felt cut off from God. So the first thing they did was to hid themselves. They are naked. They are estranged from God. There is a separation. God came and clothed them with a garment of skin. In order to clothe them with the skin of animals, there had to be death. So some animals were slain to make clothes for them. Guilt and shame and separation were covered by sacrifice. Sacrifice is the only way to deal with guilt and separation from God. It points to the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 28b. “…to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. When we hear the word ‘ransom,’ we tend to think of kidnapping, like Liam Neeson faces in the Taken movies. The bad guys kidnap someone, usually someone from a wealthy family, then they demand a ransom payment to return the person. It is easy to transfer that kidnapping idea across to this text and assume that people actually belong to Satan because he has stolen them. Satan might be thought of as the owner of people and Jesus’ death pays Satan the price he demands to set us free. So, the ransom is thought of being payment to Satan. But that is not correct. Ransom is an analogy from human experience. The concept of ransom is one of many that helps us appreciate how much we have been saved from our sin. Jesus did not purchase our freedom from sin not with gold and silver, but with his precious blood. When it says that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, Jesus paid the ransom to God, not Satan. Because of our sin, we should all receive eternal punishment for it. There is a great cost that we all owe to God, a price that we cannot pay. But Jesus in his death paid that price and rescued us from God’s wrath. He paid the ransom, the price that was needed to buy our freedom. Instead of being slaves to our sin heading to certain eternal death, Jesus freed us and made us holy children of God.

Why did Jesus tell his disciples about his death repeatedly? Jesus wanted to plant the essence of the gospel—that is—his death and resurrection in their hearts. At that time, there was growing anticipation among the people for Jesus to establish an earthly messianic kingdom. People expected Jesus to be a political and military Messiah. They followed Jesus in eager expectation that he would be inaugurated as the King of Israel and restore the kingdom of Israel. Their anticipation was earthbound, nationalistic and futile. Jesus wanted to break their false hope. But his death on the cross would not be the end. Jesus said in verse 19b, “On the third day he will be raised to life!” There is no living hope in this world. 1 Peter 1:3,4 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you.” Living in this world, we may seek to possess the things of the world. But they all perish. Only the kingdom of God established by the blood of Jesus is an everlasting hope. There we will see Jesus face to face and be clothed with the glorious resurrection body which will look like angels in heaven. This was the reason Jesus taught his disciples about his death and resurrection repeatedly.

**Second**, the Son of Man came to serve (20-28). Look at verses 20-21. “Then 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. She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.’” The mother of the sons of Zebedee is the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. That means that they are cousins of Jesus. It was a bold and shameless request, especially in the hearing of the other ten apostles, appealing on the basis of family connection. It was a brazen power play. A moment ago, they heard of Jesus’ prediction of suffering, death and resurrection. They did not understand what Jesus was talking about. What he predicted was the complete opposite of what they had expected or hoped for. Since they could not understand Jesus’ words concerning his death and resurrection, they decided to proceed to take care of an important agenda with Jesus before they arrived in Jerusalem. They wanted to bargain for the right and left seats of Jesus in his kingdom. Feeling a little embarrassed to recommend themselves for important and honorable positions, they enlisted their mother to make the request on their behalf. They had a strong political ambition.

Look at verse 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.” In order to be great and honorable, everyone has to pay a cost. Drinking cups of coffee is enjoyable. But the cup Jesus mentioned in verse 22 refers to the cup of suffering and death that he was about to drink. Probably James and John did not understand what “cup” meant, but they were ready to do anything if only they could obtain the honor of sitting at the right and left side of Jesus in his kingdom. They answered, “We can.” (22b) They wanted glory without the suffering that leads to it. They wanted a throne without the altar of sacrifice. They wanted a crown without a cross. Then Jesus said to 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.” (23) In this way Jesus predicted that James and John would suffer together with Jesus. Indeed James became the first martyr among the Twelve (Ac 12:2) and John was exiled on the island of Patmos. Jesus also told them that even if they paid the price for being great, it was up to God to whom he would give those honorable seats. Our God is Sovereign. God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. (1Pe 5:5) God exalts those who are humble in heart and humbles those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. (Lk 1:51,52) When we have faith that God is sovereign, we can escape from political ways of thinking and serve God with humble and pure hearts, entrusting our futures in God’s hands.

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John (24). Their indignation reveals that each of them also wanted to be number one among them. Especially, Peter thought that he was the most loyal, number one disciple. When he saw these two sneaky guys using the influence of their mother, he was very upset. 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.” (25) It is the general tendency that men want to be served instead of serving. Many people want to yield power over others. Look at verses 26-27. “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” Here Jesus is telling us that true power and glory comes from serving others. True power, glory or greatness comes from serving others in the name of Jesus. Here Jesus teaches his disciples servant leadership. Leadership is given by God. (Ro 13:1) God gives a person leadership over others not to exploit them for his own selfish gain and glory but to serve them with genuine concern for their welfare until others are built up in Jesus. Even if a leader has genuine concern for others and is willing to serve them, still it is not easy to become a respected and beloved leader. A leader should not assert his authority to others, demanding them to submit to his authority. Instead, a leader must earn respect from others through his sacrificial servantship. A leader must become a servant and slave to all and be willing to meet others’ endless demands and needs.

Jesus himself is our example. Look at verse 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 called himself the Son of Man. That is the Messianic term drawn from Daniel 7:13, and is used more than 80 times in the gospels by Jesus to refer to himself. It speaks of him as the incarnate one, the Messiah, God in human flesh. He came not to be served, but to serve and gave his life for others. For he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross (Php 2:6-8). Jesus Christ went through the greatest humiliation ever. God became man. The sovereign of the universe, the sovereign of all eternity came as a sin offering. The greatest humiliation of all. That is why in the Kingdom of God, he is the greatest, the most exalted because he was the most humbled. He demonstrated the example. Forfeiting our comforts to meet others’ needs, that is service. His service extended to the giving of his life. The ultimate act of service is to die on behalf of someone else. John 15:13 says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

A theologian William Barclay said, “The world may assess a man’s greatness by the number of people whom he controls, and who are at his beckon call, or by his intellectual standing and his academic eminence, or by the number of committees of which he is a member, or by the size of his bank balance and the material possessions which he has amassed. But in the assessment of Jesus Christ, these things are irrelevant.” What is relevant is his humility. Ask yourself the question: what sacrifice do you make to serve Christ? What sacrifice? What pain? Or do you demand mostly to be served? Those are very important questions that we need to face every day.

**Third**, Jesus heals two blind men (29-34). In verses 29-34, near Jericho, two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” Jesus must have been preoccupied with the disciples who were still very immature, but who had to carry on his work after His death which would occur in a few days. He could have been distracted by the thought of crucifixion and becoming the sacrificial lamb as he looked up the plateau to Jerusalem from the vantage point of Jericho far below. It would be understandable that he really didn’t have time in this particular moment to stop and take care of two blind men out of many blind men in Jericho. They say that in Jericho, there grew balsam bushes which could be made into a special kind of medicine which was good for the curing of the eyes. And yet he made time. Jesus Christ is not too busy redeeming the entire world to give sight to two insignificant blind men who have nothing to offer him but their problem. Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him. In this way, Jesus showed an example that he came to serve, not to be served. These men were blind. But they had better spiritual sight than the crowds, perhaps even better than Jesus’ own disciples. They recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of David. They believed that Jesus could heal them and they asked boldly for their sight. Here we see that we can ask Jesus for what he alone can and wants to give us. If Jesus asks you, what do you want, what will you ask for?

Today we learned about servantship. Like James and John, we think that important positions and titles will make us great. But positions, titles or degrees do not make people great. Those things may make people proud and useless. In order to be truly great, we must imitate Jesus’ servantship and life-giving spirit. May God help you serve God and others with Jesus’ servantship and life-giving spirit. Then God will make you truly great.