

Keynotes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 28/03/2021

Mini Series – “Making Disciples”

Part 17 - Matthew 20 v 17-28 “Ambitious Disciples”

Matthew 20:17-28 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸“See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” ²²Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” ²³He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Ambition is defined as a strong desire to do or achieve something. It can be either a good or a bad thing. Being ambitious at the expense of others, putting yourself at the centre and exploiting other people to get to your goal, is a bad thing. You could be ambitious in a good way, putting other people first and seeking to serve and care for them. The difference between good and bad ambition lies in our motives and what is at the centre of our affections.

All of us have ambitions, whether it be to have a family, a particular job or buy a house. On a larger scale, we might desire to explore new areas of science, medicine or the earth and space. It is part of what it means to be human, but a problem arises when our ambitions become sinful, flowing from ungodly motives and the desire:

- to rule at the expense of others
- to get glory for ourselves at the expense of God being glorified

Matthew 20 shows us two types of ambition (see p4 for **verses 1-16**, then above). We see ungodly ambition in the lives of Jesus' disciples and godly ambition in the life of Jesus.

Godly ambition leads to us arranging our lives around the goal of giving ourselves for the benefit of other people.

v28 (above) shows us how Jesus spoke of service but what prompted him to speak these words? In the passage above, we see a mother (Salome) wanting her two sons (James and John, both disciples of Jesus) to have the highest positions when Jesus rules over his kingdom. This is a family with ambition! How did this request come about?

a) It is an ungodly response to a promise (Matt 19: 28 see p4)

Jesus had promised the disciples that they would sit on thrones in his kingdom. James and John had obviously been trying to work out how they could get the best thrones, missing the whole point of what Jesus was saying. He was speaking about his glory, as the one who will rule over the kingdom of God. Any glory the disciples have in the kingdom will be simply to reflect the glory of Christ, for the glory of Christ. The brothers were ambitious for status, and wanted to sit next to Jesus, to be as close as possible to the highest place of honour.

We also are prone to taking the promises of God and turning them around to use them for our own goals and ambitions, missing the point that it is not about us but all about Jesus.

b) This request calls on family favours.

There are indications in John's gospel that Salome was the sister of Mary (the earthly mother of Jesus), making James and John his cousins. It looks as if they are using their family ties to get the positions of honour. This happens today in many organisations, including the church. The ambition for status, along with family ties, leads to people using their privileges to fulfil their ambition. Church leaders may put family members into positions of leadership, or people may try to get close to senior leaders in order to satisfy their ambition for status.

God tells us that the human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. We need to take notice of this, and be very careful. What might appear to be honourable can be driven by desire for status or family ambitions.

c) This request results in community strife (v24)

The other disciples were indignant but for the wrong reasons. They would have been justified if they had been indignant about the ungodly ambition shown by James and John, but Jesus' response (vv25-26a above) shows us that they were indignant because they wanted the highest position for themselves. They were just as ambitious as James and John but didn't have the same family advantage, and felt left behind.

Ungodly ambition has led to disunity.

Churches and other communities can be destroyed by this kind of ungodly ambition. When someone wants a position of perceived status and uses family or friendship to achieve it the result will always be disunity, because there will be others who are equally ambitious but don't have the same advantage. Where did it go wrong?

The hearts of the disciples were wrong, and that led to a wrong focus.

Rather than seeking the glory of Christ, James and John sought their own glory and were prepared to use Jesus to get it. The other ten disciples also sought their own glory and expressed indignation to Jesus to get it.

They were glory thieves, but so are we all.

At some time, we have all used our advantages to gain status, or have felt indignant when someone else got what we thought we deserved. We are all more focused on our own glory than on the glory of God.

We need to see what Jesus says about greatness in the kingdom.

d) This request leads to a lesson in greatness (vv25-28 above)

Jesus spells out that:

- Greatness means being a servant
- Being first in importance means being a slave (a doulos)

A doulos was owned by someone, had no control over their life and no rights, yet Jesus says the greatest people in the kingdom of God are those who are doulos (slaves). They

are not just servants or slaves to Jesus, but also to other people in the community. If you want to be a great disciple with a godly ambition, then you need to be:

- A servant to Christ and his people
- A slave (doulos) to Jesus and his followers

Jesus is our example (v28) '**even as** the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. He sacrificed himself for the good of his people, giving up his life to death on a cross to pay the price that our sin deserved so that he could **purchase** us to be his people.

- If you are a believer in Christ, you are not your own. You have been purchased by Christ. You belong to him as his doulos, and he says to you 'Be a doulos to others'.

Just as he served us by securing our salvation from judgement so we are to serve others for their eternal good.

- We are to use the gifts and the time that God has given us to serve other people for their good. If you are older, you may feel you don't have much to offer, and can only pray, but that is a great way to serve, giving your time to pray for others in your community.
- You may have a large income and, if so, then you are called to use the money God has entrusted to you to serve others for their good.

Our natural inclination is to use ungodly means to fulfil our ambitions, and to see greatness as being seated on the best throne. We do not naturally have the ambition to serve as a slave! We need help.

Jesus isn't just our example, but by his Spirit within us, he empowers and strengthens us to live this

life of service to other people. We do not do this to get right with God. We can only do that through

the grace of God by trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Once we have done that, living a life of

service to others is the natural outworking of the life of Christ within us.

Though it is Christ at work within us, we still have a part to play. There are three actions we need to carry out if we are going to know Christ's strengthening for service.

1) Live with gratitude to Christ (Matt 20:1-16 see p4)

In this parable, we see that those who served for one hour were paid the same wages as those who served for twelve hours. The former got more than they deserved. Any rewards we receive as members of God's kingdom are given to us by God because of his grace alone. We have not earned them. We are not members of God's kingdom because we deserve it. If we were paid the wages we deserve then what we would get is eternity in Hell. Instead, we get eternal life in Christ.

The proper response is gratitude. With a heart full of gratitude, we are less likely to be ambitious for our own glory and more likely to be ambitious for Christ to be glorified.

2) Submit to suffering with Christ (vv22-23)

Jesus challenged James and John to drink his cup of suffering - the agony of the cross.

Suffering came before the crown. They would also suffer for the sake of his kingdom.

James was beheaded and John was exiled to an island prison. Suffering comes before the crown and Jesus uses suffering to humble us too. When we suffer for Jesus and with Jesus, we see ourselves for the weak, needy, sinful and grace needing people we really are. The most servant hearted people are those who have been humbled in the furnace of affliction, and who have a healthy awareness of their own sin and God's grace.

For those who are suffering now, keep in mind that suffering is the means that God is using to humble you so that you will be a better servant, and through which he will bring you to the honour of being a slave in his kingdom.

3) Serve in dependence on Christ

Peter was among the ten who were indignant, but after being humbled through suffering, he showed that he was not concerned about status and position. (1 Peter 4:1-2, 8-11 see p4). His concern was about how we serve.

Whatever it is that God gives us to do, it needs to be done in a way that glorifies God.

The strength to serve as a slave in the kingdom of God is freely available to us. We gain that strength by taking hold of the promises of Christ, believing them and then serving in the light of those promises.

That is the only service that glorifies Christ, which is to be our ultimate ambition.

What does it mean to be an ambitious disciple in the kingdom of God? It means to be:

- ambitious to see Christ exalted
- ambitious to serve for the sake of others

Matthew 20:1-16: For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius^[a] a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'^[b] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

Matthew 19: 28 Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world,^[b] when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

1 Peter 4:1-2, Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

1 Peter 4:8-11 ⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.