

Imagine an organizational chart for a company or a government. That organizational chart probably has the most powerful person at the top: the CEO or the president or the king. And then under him are his second and third and fourth in command and it goes on from there. Now imagine an organizational chart where the king or the president or the CEO is on the bottom. Today Jesus says that that is the organizational chart for the kingdom of God, with the Lord taking the lowest place and serving everybody else.¹ Today Jesus says, **“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” (Matthew 20:28)**. And Jesus tells us that if we want to be great in the Kingdom of God, we need to take the lowest place and serve others. You see in the Kingdom of God everything is different. Today we see the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness. And the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness is to Suffer with Jesus and to Serve like Jesus.

Follow the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness

- I. Suffer with Jesus
- II. Serve like Jesus

First, Follow the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness: Suffer with Jesus. In the Gospel for today from Matthew chapter 20 Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. And he was going up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He wanted to prepare his disciples for this and so he took them aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

Jesus had predicted his death at least twice before. Back in Matthew chapter 16, it says, **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hand of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matthew 16:21)**. In the next chapter Jesus predicted his death a second time: **“When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life’” (Matthew 17:22-23)**. Our passage today contains the third passion prediction in Matthew. And commentators point out that this prediction is much more detailed. Listen to how much more detail Jesus gives his disciples in this prediction of his suffering: **“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life” (Matthew 20:18-19)**.

He tells his disciples that he will be handed over to the Gentiles. We think of Pontius Pilate and his soldiers. He tells his disciples that he will be mocked. We think of the Roman soldiers twisting together a crown of thorns, and putting a purple robe on him, and kneeling down to make fun of him. He tells his disciples that he will be flogged. And then that he would be crucified. Crucifixion was a terrible form of death. It was very painful and very humiliating. As we go through Lent we get to see what Jesus was willing to go through for us to save us from our sins.

Jesus chose the way of suffering, but the disciples were choosing the way of selfishness. The mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Jesus and knelt down before him and made a request of him. It says, **“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him” (Matthew 20:20)**. The sons of Zebedee are James and John. And this request comes just as much from James and John. We know that because in Mark’s Gospel it only mentions James and John (10:35). And so James and John were making this request through their mother.

What was their request? **“‘What is it you want’ [Jesus] 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’” (Matthew 20:21)**. They were asking to have the two highest seats of honor when Jesus reigns in his glory. Commentators point out that in the previous chapter Jesus gave his disciples the wonderful promise that he would they would sit on twelve thrones

¹ I owe this analogy to R.C.H. Lenski, who used the picture of a pyramid.

in the kingdom. In Matthew 19:28 it says, **“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’ (Matthew 19:28).** James and John apparently thought that these thrones would be given on a first come, first served basis. But they didn’t realize that the point was not to be served but to serve.

They also didn’t realize that both Jesus and the disciples would have to suffer before they entered glory.² **“‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said to them. ‘Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’” (Matthew 20:22).** The cup Jesus was going to drink was his suffering on the cross. Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, **“May Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).** And again he prayed, **“My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done” (Matthew 26:42).**

In our passage Jesus asks James and John if they could drink the cup that he was going to drink. **‘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. Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink from my cup.’” (Matthew 20:22-23)** James and John would both undergo great suffering because of their preaching about Jesus. For James, his suffering came relatively soon. He was martyred pretty early on in the mission of the church. In Acts chapter 12 it says, **“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword” (Acts 12:1-2).** John, on the other hand, had a long ministry. Tradition says that he lived into old age. But John too suffered for Jesus. He was exiled to the island of Patmos, and that’s where he wrote the book of Revelation.

And not just James and John but every Christian will have to suffer with Jesus before they enter glory. Every Christian needs to suffer with Jesus, including you, including me. That suffering might not be martyrdom. It wasn’t for John. But we will have to suffer. Maybe that suffering will be a terrible diagnosis that tests our faith. Maybe that suffering will be mockery or ridicule or exclusion because we are Christians.

But as we suffer with Jesus we have two great comforts. The first great comfort is this. The cup of suffering that Jesus drank was God’s wrath over our sins.³ And because Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath over our sins we will never have to. Instead, we will have the glory of heaven.

And the second comfort we have is this. Because Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath, suffering has a different purpose in our life. God sends us suffering in order to bring us closer to Jesus, in order to make us more like Jesus, and so that we might rely more fully on Jesus.

Some have well said that the way of the kingdom goes through suffering, but it ends in glory. Follow the Kingdom’s Way of Glory. Suffer with Jesus and, secondly, Serve like Jesus.

When the other ten disciples heard what James and John had done, they were angry. They were angry because they wanted the highest seats for themselves. **“When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers” (Matthew 20:24).** And Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach them about greatness in the Kingdom of God. **“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. Not so with you” (Matthew 20:25-26a).** Some commentators point out that people in the ancient world agreed that rulers should not abuse their power, but then they did it anyway. In a similar way, we recognize when someone else is bossy and we don’t like it. We agree that it’s a bad thing when people are always taking and never giving. But do we ever display some of the same selfishness that we criticize in others?

² I owe this insight to Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 485.

³ I owe this insight to Geoffrey Gibbs in his commentary on Matthew in the Concordia Commentary series. Concordia Publishing House.

Our hearts need to be changed. And what changes our hearts is what Jesus says in 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” (20:28).** Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. A ransom is a price paid to set someone free. We were captive to sin. Because of our selfishness and because of our sin, we would have gone to hell. But Jesus gave his life as the ransom price to set us free. Through faith in Jesus we are free from the punishment of sin. People who have studied this passage have shown that “ransom for many” has the idea of exchange. He stood in our place under the wrath of God. He exchanged his life for ours, so that we could be free.

Now what are we going to do with this freedom? Martin Luther once wrote a book called *The Freedom of a Christian Man*. And in that book he said that a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. And a Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. In the Kingdom of God we use our freedom to serve.

Jesus says, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Matthew 20:26-27).** Notice that Jesus does not say that it’s wrong to want to become great. Instead, Jesus redefines greatness. He redefines greatness as service. **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Matthew 20:26-27).** Follow the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness, Serve like Jesus.

With the Coronavirus we find that we are spending a lot more time at home to protect our own health and the health of others. During this time when we are spending more time at home, how can you be a servant and serve others in your home? As Christians there are no jobs that are beneath us. Jesus teaches us to serve others. That’s what greatness is in the Kingdom of God.

In Lent we see what Jesus did to save us. We see that he went to Jerusalem to be mocked and flogged and crucified. He did that to save us, to ransom us, to redeem us. And when we see what he did to save us, it changes us. It changes us to want to follow the Kingdom’s Way of Greatness, to suffer with Jesus and to serve like Jesus. Amen.