

Matthew 20:17-28

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 August 2023

Preacher: Chris Cradock

[0:00] Good morning. And please, if you would turn to our passage this morning. I think in your Bibles, page 825, Matthew chapter 20 and verse 17.

If you would keep that open in front of you. And let me pray before we hear God's word. Our heavenly Father, not my words, but your eternal word.

Not our understanding, but your Holy Spirit. Not our knowledge, but your wisdom and what you would reveal to us.

For your glory alone. Amen. The ability to pay attention would seem a vanishing commodity. I know it's getting harder and harder in my life. It's probably the same for you. In fact, it's getting harder and harder that people are even writing books about it. And in his book by Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, which on reflection I decided was probably a pretty good title for this sermon.

[1:14] He quotes from a commencement speech given by the writer David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College some years ago. Who was commenting on the problem faced by most human beings of being too wrapped up in themselves.

He began thus. He said, A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to automatically be certain of, it turns out, is totally wrong and deluded. In particular, everything in my immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe.

He went on, What needs to happen is to somehow alter or get free of my natural hardwired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and sees and interprets everything through this lens of self.

And he concluded that he desires not to be deluded, not lost in abstract argument inside my own head, instead of paying attention to what is going on right in front of me.

And that is a problem, isn't it, of modern life, paying attention to the wrong thing, not paying attention to what's going on right in front of us. It's essentially not a problem of failing to pay attention whatsoever, but failing to pay attention to the right thing, and paying attention only to ourselves, the world inside our own heads, we might say.

[2:46] But this is not a new problem. In our passage, and in fact the preceding chapters, 2,000 years ago Jesus gave a sermon on what the kingdom of God was like, about what true greatness was, about what it was like.

But the people, the disciples who heard it, could only concern themselves with how great that they could be. They were only concerned about their kingdoms. Jesus spent the previous two chapters, from verse 13 of chapter 19, if you quickly glance down, that famous passage of the children coming to Jesus, summarizing the character of the coming kingdom.

And it's summed up in those, a verse that is repeated, a very famous verse, but many who are first will be last, and the last will be first, and then verse 16 of chapter 20, it says, so the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Why it's swapped around, I couldn't tell you. It's probably something significant. But certainly that it was repeated, was because Jesus wanted to tell something to his disciples, and he wanted them to know it.

Our passage also begins with Jesus talking about how he was going to die a painful and humiliating death on a cross. But this isn't the first time he's said this to the disciples.

[4:08] It's the third time in Matthew's Gospel. And just finally, just so that we will pay attention, because I think God is trying to say something in this passage, for the reason is that this is repeated both in Mark and in Luke, almost verbatim, the passage that we have today.

You'd think he's trying to tell us something. And it's not just that the prophecy of Jesus' death, as I say, is the most important aspect to focus on here, because it bookends the passage that we have. In between teaching about spiritual ambition is about Jesus' death. And that's why I want to talk about attention today, because it's more than just an example of poor taste or crass insensitivity on behalf of the disciples and James and John's mother.

What's really at the heart of the verses here is not the disciples or us, but it's about Jesus. But the Jesus that we're asked to pay attention to is not an easy example.

Verse 18, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.

[5:42] Jesus had been talking about his kingdom, the kingdom of God. And for the disciples, and in fact any Jew listening, a kingdom would have been just what they wanted to hear about.

Any kingdom, as long as it wasn't a Roman kingdom, which they had been under for quite some time. But then Jesus here talks about not only being killed and put to death by the Romans, but also being condemned to death by the Jewish authorities also.

Jesus' words make clear that this would be a total rejection of him. So that even if there was a Jew, the Jewish authorities, who would be the establishment of the day, they are going to reject him too, as well as the Romans.

So there's no glorious triumph as far as the disciples are concerned here in this death of what's going to happen. It was a humiliating death.

And one more that was going to happen in Jerusalem itself, on the eve of them going up in the city of God, the centre of the Jewish religion and nation. It's a bit like Serena Vigman when she first took over the England women's football team.

[6:58] I don't know if they've won. I don't know if it's still going on at the moment. But let's just imagine the scene. She goes into the dressing room, disappointing results, and she says, right, I'm going to take you to the World Cup final.

And she says, I'm going to teach you a bit about football and skills and stuff like that. But really, the crux of what I want you to learn, you're going to learn by coming to watch me every week clean out a public toilet.

And it's that kind of incongruity that kind of just doesn't make sense that Jesus' death represents here for the disciples.

It should, as that kind of death, even shock us now, even though we're very familiar with the cross. The cross now to us is a symbol of hope, of life. We make gold crosses.

We put crosses in paintings all through our culture. But then that wasn't what the cross meant. The cross then meant humiliation, degradation, a complete rejection, and of course, pain.

[8:06] And so even now, it should give us pause for thought about why this was necessary and what was the cost. It demands our attention. And you would have thought that it would have given the disciples pause, at least, for thought too.

But instead, we have the scene that unfolds. Verse 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. And he said to her, What do you want?

And 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. Now, one partial explanation for this may be, it's not certain, but it might, it's, a lot of scholars think it's probable that the mother of James and John was related to Jesus' mother, Mary.

And it's not unusual, and it still isn't in many cultures, in fact, even our own, to some extent, for family to approach those in authority and ask them for special preferment from powerful relatives.

It's one possible explanation. We don't know for sure. But whatever it is, James and John's mother isn't really the issue here, because Jesus is not fooled by her coming to ask.

[9:20] And in his response, he immediately uses the plural you in addressing James and John. And in fact, as we see later on from the disciples, he's really addressing the disciples.

Jesus answered, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink? You see, he knew what was on their mind.

He knew that when they heard that there was a kingdom going, the next thing that they were thinking was, what's in it for us? Just as Peter had done earlier in chapter 19, just as the rich young ruler had done in that same chapter.

After all, the disciples were, weren't they, the chosen ones? They were the ones selected by Jesus, called by him. They were the ones who had given up most for him.

They were special, his oldest followers. What's in it for us? And how often, if we're honest, do our hearts echo those sentiments?

[10:21] Even as mature Christians, Lord, I've been good all this time. I've been faithful. I've had to give up things. Maybe a relationship. Maybe just a Sunday.

Maybe some of my money. When do I see a return? What's in it for me? I've born with people. I've put up with elders. I've put up with the hymn choices that I don't like for so long.

And these thoughts, these turning in on ourselves to our own concerns, can come, as I say, even when we're mature Christians. When we might be called strong in our faith, just as the disciples were.

James and John's mum, she was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. The disciples didn't doubt or have no faith in Jesus at this point or later. But it's that temptation, isn't it, to listen to, as Foster Wallace said, that hardwired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered. It's there in the disciples. It's there in us. Pride, higher position, recognition, status, can overcome even the most resolute of believers. Interestingly, John Calvin, when he was writing on this passage, said, for often depraved thoughts and feelings come over us in the middle of the race and turn us off course.

[11:47] Such a thought is enough to make any one of us despair, perhaps, because it's true that we're all as self-centered as disciples. But I want to now come on and we'll see in this passage why ultimately we should not despair.

Because it's not, as I say, about the disciples and about us, it's ultimately about Jesus and how we are liberated from this conflict that goes on inside our own heads and hearts. And we see Jesus' response, isn't it?

It's gentle. It's an encouragement in many ways. Verse 22. You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?

And they said, we are able. And he said to them, you will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those who have been prepared by my Father. Are you able?

We are able. And this shows us the amazing and wonderful paradox of the Christian life, the yes we can that goes with the no we can't.

[12:55] Could anyone drink the cup of God's wrath except Jesus? No, of course not. Could anybody satisfy God's wrath and anger for sin and make atonement for our sin? No. But yet James and John did suffer for Christ.

They're two of the earliest martyrs. We read about James being killed in Acts 12. John was only exiled, but he suffered through the course of his life.

Both suffered greatly for bearing witness to Christ. And so in a sense, they were able to share in Christ's cup. And in so far that that is true, we are all called to share in Christ's cup, in Christ's suffering.

Paul in Philippians talks of the fellowship of his sufferings, the fellowship of his sufferings. Jesus himself has just said in chapter 16, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

It was a hard saying for those who heard it then. It's a hard saying for us now. But James and John and the other disciples and countless Christians down the century show us that through listening to Christ's teaching and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are equipped to share in his sufferings as well as in his glory.

[14:10] As I said, it's important to remember both the can and the cannot of the Christian life. We need to understand both. One, the can that we can imitate our Lord in his suffering and in his sacrifice.

The cannot that we cannot take his place. too much emphasis or teaching on the yes we can. Well, that can lead to pride, arrogance, perhaps even some sort of Messiah complex.

Too much emphasis on the teaching that we can't. It's all Jesus. It can lead to lethargy, complacency, and perhaps even a kind of despair or spiritual depression.

We can and we can't. It's a question of degree. Jesus, again, is calling us back out of ourselves to pay attention to him. Only through looking to him, learning from him, calling on him, are we equipped for the Christian life and its highs and nos.

All through this passage, Jesus is saying, look at me, pay attention to me. So I think there's two areas of application for us.

[15:22] Firstly, to pay attention to each other and secondly, to pay attention to Jesus. Pay attention to each other because glory looks like a servant.

Jesus teaches his disciples, doesn't he, after calling them out. But, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them.

It shall not be so among you. But whoever will be great among you must be your servant and whoever will be first among you must be your slave. James and John had not asked themselves how they could build the kingdom of God but I hope it's a question that we would ask ourselves. I hope and I believe we all do want to help build God's kingdom. And what Jesus is teaching here is that to build the kingdom we must first serve the kingdom.

To build the kingdom we must serve the kingdom. And building anything is hard and dirty work. When I was thinking about this I was thinking about how I used to commute wearing a suit backwards and forwards from the city and pretty much every evening you'd stop at certain stations the doors would open the other people sitting in business attire and suddenly the construction workers or the builders would come on.

[16:41] And they looked very very different. They were covered in dust hair was everywhere they had clothes and boots that were all worn away or dusty or whatever. Nails were all chipped.

They're the worst dressed people there but they have to get filthy. It's part of the job in all weathers and they have to work. They have to be prepared to hit their thumb with a hammer get splinters or stand in a trench full of water digging.

but more than that they need to be prepared and the way they look shows that they are prepared they need to be prepared to work within the physical realities of the site that they're working with and the materials that they have to use.

To be a good builder requires to be in some sense a servant of the physical environment that you find yourself in and working with that.

and so too the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is synonymous with the people of God the church. Jesus says here that to build particularly in a position of leadership in Christ's kingdom is to be a servant a slave to the human material that makes up the church the men and women there in the place where you are.

[17:54] And to do that we have to pay attention to others if we are to build the kingdom and be like Christ. We are called are we not to serve others needs above our own and to that we need to know what their needs are what the needs of the church are we need to pay attention to each other.

And while Jesus is talking primarily about leadership here it applies to us all but particularly in leadership leaders need to be not so wrapped up in their own self image or their own welfare or glory or reputation that they become unaware of those over whom they have authority.

They above all others need to pay attention. Practically it means two things I think one we are not above anybody whatever our role we are called to in the church even those in authority are to think of themselves not even as equals but as servants.

And secondly that we are not above anything all service however menial is service. In fact the more ordinary the more necessary it often is and often the less noticed.

Paul sums this up in Philippians chapter 2 do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

[19:16] secondly we are to pay attention to Jesus because glory authority looks like Jesus.

Glory and authority looks like Jesus. and when we say we should act in humility we can be a servant and yet we still recognise that we are totally prone to being inward looking and thinking only of ourselves that can be a daunting thought surely if my heart is so prone to sin and pride if I achieve even humility won't these things just become another source of pride another way to put myself above others.

We probably know some Christians who can show some of that tendency. Humble is a very overused word these days I've noticed. Most people talk about being humbled but I'm not sure they mean it and most of them don't appear very humble for very long.

The truth is that on its own teaching about being a servant or being humble is impossible for us. Impossible. And this is where I want you to remind you of what I said at the beginning this passage is not about the disciples or us or even the disciples mothers but it's about Jesus.

Jesus says to us I know this is hard I know that better than you do but if you look to me to my example you'll be able to do it. And verse 28 tells us this even as the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[20:52] Jesus is our example in this and it's worth noting what the end the results of his service is isn't it? To give his life as a ransom for many.

Christ gave his life as a ransom. He's lived a life of service and he died on a cross to liberate his people to set us free and that's what service does. When we serve others' needs in a sense we do liberate them.

It's a question of degree I'm not saying as I said before that we can liberate them like Christ but it works in the same way. It is similar to it is like when we serve each other we liberate them.

Isn't that a wonderful thought? And even though we know the depth of our pride and self centredness it's not really one of the deep desires of our hearts to join with Jesus in building his church and bringing freedom to his people.

Our service like Christ frees others. Which brings us back to where our true motivation and the source of our power comes from that enables us to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

[22:04] I've talked about paying attention to Jesus but really we want to love him don't we? And to love him is to pay attention to him. We pay attention to the things that we love.

Or too frequently it's ourselves but it holds true in anything. It's about this passage how Jesus is and how wonderful he is.

It's about paying attention to him something the sons of Zebedee and the other ten were failing to do. And as I said attention is very close to love. In fact it goes with love.

Iris Murdoch in the essay God and the good said this about overcoming negative influences or experiences in her life. Where strong emotions of sexual love or of hatred or resentment or jealousy are concerned pure will can usually achieve little.

It's a small use telling oneself stop being in love stop feeling resentment be just. What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind from a different source the acquiring!

[23:13] of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing. We kind of know this when we want to get out of the rut of something we need to replace it with something else to get new objects of attention that give us new energies as a result of refocusing.

The disciples could not live as Jesus called them in this passage in their own strength. They needed to look outside of themselves to Jesus a reorientation away from the normal patterns of their human hearts new energies as I said to use Iris Murdoch's phrase from a different source

outside of themselves.

We pay attention to the things we love to the people we love but looking unto Jesus paying attention to Jesus it takes us out of ourselves it takes us out of our preoccupations with pride and status and position that are so natural to us love of Jesus enables us to focus on someone outside of ourselves to see him in his death and resurrection as our model and as our savior and so as Christians to do this we read his word we reorientate our affections in worship on the Lord's day we see his body the church as ours to serve all of these things some of them are called the ordinary means of grace what we do every day to take us out of ourselves and we pray we pray don't we pray to to pray!

pray! pray! pray pray pray! properly a petition, it's not a list of requests. Prayer is simply attention to God which is a form of love. We pay attention to the things that we love, to Jesus. I've talked a lot about attention. The word attention is interesting, it doesn't mean, well the root of it doesn't come from a narrow focus or blocking out everything else and concentrating on one thing. The Latin root is *tendere*, from where we get our word tension and it means to stretch, to take out and to stretch. So I think it's quite helpful in terms of thinking of paying attention to God that we think of God, of Jesus, as that attachment point for our hearts and our minds. That we attach to him and it stretches us out of ourselves. And this is the power of the Christian life for us, even of humble service or even of suffering. It's the same Saviour whom we love, who we see, who we attend to and he draws us out of ourselves, out of that internal conflict with ourselves and sets us free. And as we come to the table now we have another opportunity in a different way to pay attention to God, to love him, to pay attention to whom we love. And God grant that as we love him that we pay attention to him who we love and become more like him.