**Matthew 20:20-23**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-20/matthew-2020-23/>

The mother of James and John approaches Jesus with a special favor for her sons. She asks that He grant them the place of honor on His right and left when He is in His kingdom. Jesus tells her and her sons that they don’t know what they are asking for and asks if they are prepared to drink the cup. They say they are able. He tells them that they will drink the cup but it is Jesus’s Father who will determine where people sit in the Kingdom.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 10:35-40.

The disciples did not understand what Jesus had just told them. They did not understand that He was about to be arrested by the religious authorities, handed over to the Romans to be crucified and then raised from the dead when they arrived in Jerusalem (Luke 18:34). But they also seemed to not understand that greatness in His kingdom is a matter of humbly serving others in love; rather than dominating or manipulating people to be first.

Even along their final journey with Jesus they did not know these things.

Soon after Jesus foretold His fate, the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, James and John. These two brothers had been disciples of Jesus from early on in His ministry. He had called them while they were fishing with their father, Zebedee, in a boat on the sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:21). These brothers, along with Peter, appear to have enjoyed a close relationship to Jesus, even as compared to the other disciples.

Jesus brought this trio with Him on the mountain when He was transfigured and revealed His glory (Matthew 17:1-13). And Jesus would also invite Peter and the sons of Zebedee with Him further into the garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him, when His soul was grieved and distressed over the trials He was about to suffer (Matthew 26:37). And one of Zebedee’s sons (John) was referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23).

James and John’s mother came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Jesus. Matthew records that she was bowing down to Him to make her and her sons’ request, as she came to petition Jesus. Bowing down was the customary protocol when approaching someone greater than yourself to seek their favor.

Jesus knew what was happening. And He asked her, What do you wish? Jesus understood that they wanted something. At this point she presented her request.

Her request was: Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.

Mrs. Zebedee was asking for her two sons to have positions of honor in His kingdom. To sit on the right and left of the king is the highest rank that someone who is not the ruler themselves can have. She was asking for her two sons to be first in authority after Jesus in the Messiah’s kingdom. She was asking Jesus to elevate her sons and for them to be the greatest.

On one hand her request was not off-base. Her request demonstrates faith in Jesus. She clearly believed that Jesus is God’s Messiah who will restore Israel and reign over it in the Messianic kingdom. Mrs. Zebedee would not be making this request of Him if she did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. And she was seeking something good for her sons. Glory and greatness are good things, if sought correctly.

God desires us to be great. Isaiah 43:7 says, “Everyone who is called by My name, And whom I have created for glory, Whom I have formed, even whom I have made.” He wants us to do great things (Ephesians 2:10). And He wants us to seek glory in and from Him alone (Matthew 6:33; John 5:44; I Corinthians 10:31). The mother of James and John was not wrong in wishing these things for her sons.

But on the other hand, she was wrong in her perception of what greatness was. She did not conceive of greatness as Jesus defined it. She misconceived greatness according to the pattern of this world.

And so did her sons, who may have manipulated their mother to make this request on their behalf. Recall how they were with her when she came to Jesus. And in Mark’s gospel, there is no mention of their mother at all. It simply states that James and John were the ones to make this request (Mark 10:35). Layering both gospel accounts reveals that the sons of Zebedee were likely the primary instigators of this petition.

But Jesus pointed out to James, John, and their mother that they did not know what they were asking. In asking to be truly great, they were actually asking to lay down their lives for others. They did not know what they were asking for two reasons. First, they failed to see the nature of true greatness. And second, they did not understand that Jesus really was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. At this time, Jesus’s kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36).

Jesus asked His two disciples two cryptic questions. Matthew only records the first question: Are you able to drink the cup that I am about drink? Mark includes the second question: Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? (Mark 10:38).

The two disciples only partially grasped Jesus’s puzzling questions. They surmised that He was offering them a chance to be great. And they likely suspected that Jesus was asking them to be willing to die for this chance. They were committed to being great. And the two brothers along with nine of the other disciples would soon state their willingness to die for Jesus—but on their terms (Matthew 26:35). But James and John (and the other disciples) incorrectly thought Jesus was offering them greatness as they understood it, which was according to the world’s definition. They likely understood Jesus to be asking them if they would be willing to fight to gain political power in Jerusalem. This would be greatness according to the understanding of the world.

What they understood Jesus to ask at this time was “Are you willing to die to be great?” And they said yes. And there is no reason to doubt them. Thomas had voiced a willingness to face death at the hands of Jesus’s enemies (John 11:16). Peter will draw his sword and begin to resist Jesus’s arrest while greatly outnumbered (Matthew 26:51). It will be when Jesus submits to being arrested that their courage fails. This is likely because they finally begin to see that the way of Jesus is not the way they had expected. That Jesus’s kingdom was, at this time, not of this world (John 18:36).

They did not understand what Jesus was actually asking. What Jesus was actually asking was “Are you willing to live and die in such a way that you constantly put to death any and all earthly understanding of what greatness is? Are you are willing to kill your hope to be great on earth’s terms? Are you willing to suffer persecution among men for the sake of putting this ambition to death? Are you willing to trade your hope for earth’s greatness for My greatness which is the opposite of what you imagine it is?”

Jesus was asking them if they were ready to be truly great. Not as man define greatness, but as God defines it. What Jesus meant by the cup was the bitter cup of martyrdom. For Jesus, it will be the cross. It was a bitter cup to drink. It was suffering persecution for the sake of the kingdom. It was the bitterness of losing one’s life (Greek “psuche”) in order to save it (Matthew 16:24). It was the bitterness of suffering and dying for a world that hated Him. This cup was so bitter that Jesus Himself asked His Father not once, but twice, if there was any other way to accomplish His mission without having to drink it.

“And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.’”  
(Matthew 26:39)

“He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.’”  
(Matthew 26:42)

The “baptism” in Jesus’s second question was a similar reference to the cup. It was a symbolic reference to the death and burial that Jesus would soon undergo. It was an immersion into the darkness of death, suffering unjustly for the sake of God’s kingdom.

In their confusion, the sons of Zebedee were quick to accept His offer. They answered, we are able. They were ready to do what was required to sit on Jesus’s right and left in His kingdom according to what they incorrectly assumed He meant.

Jesus said to them, My cup you shall drink. By this He meant they would in fact surrender their lives for the kingdom, as Jesus would lay down His life for the kingdom. Jesus would drink this cup on the cross, as He was crucified and put to death between two robbers—“one on His right and one on His left”(Matthew 27:38). Both of Zebedees’ sons would eventually drink the cup of martyrdom. James would be put to death in Jerusalem (Acts 12:2). John would spend his final years in exile on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9).

But their drinking from the cup of martyrdom would not occur until much later. They were not able to drink from it until after Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was only after these events that the two brothers finally understood what Jesus meant. Only then did they really seem to grasp what it truly meant to be great in the kingdom. Once they did, they lived very committed lives proclaiming the fulness of His gospel. And they did, in fact, truly become great.

One evidence of the true level of greatness they obtained is their unflattering portrayal of themselves in the gospel accounts. It is unheard of to write an account of yourself where you are constantly wrong, clueless, and making missteps. But that is exactly what the disciples did. They developed such a level of humility that they were (likely) able to write an account of their own lives that would at times either have made them laugh at themselves or cringe.

Jesus indicated that one day they would die for their witness, as He would die. But Jesus also said that to have the position of honor that the two brothers and their mother requested was not Mine to give. Jesus said He did not have the authority to sit on His right or His left in the coming kingdom. The giving of those positions in the kingdom is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father. God the Father determines who gets to sit at the Messiah’s right or left.

Jesus did offer to all believers the opportunity to share His throne. In Revelation 3:21 Jesus says that to any believer who overcomes the same way He overcame, He will give the reward to share His reign. This is just as He did the will of His Father, overcoming rejection, loss, and death, and was given all authority in heaven and upon the earth (Matthew 28:18).

Jesus may have said it is not His to give because it was not yet His to give. It may not yet have been His to give because He had not yet accomplished or finished His Messianic mission, a mission assigned to Jesus by His Father (Philippians 2:5-10). It was only after His death when He said, “It is finished” (John 19:31). And it was after His resurrection when He told His disciples that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me” (Matthew 28:18). This seems to fit with Revelation 3:21. Jesus says that it is He who will grant believers who overcome to sit with Him on His throne:

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”  
(Revelation 3:21)

**Biblical Text**

**20Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to [**[**m**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matt+20&version=NASB1995#fen-NASB1995-23813m)**]Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. 21And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She \*said to Him, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.” 22But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They \*said to Him, “We are able.” 23He \*said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on *My* left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.”**