

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's* 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 fullness 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

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to ^[m]Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. ²¹ And 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."* ²² But 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."* ²³ He **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."*