

## **Living Counter-Cultural: Status**

*Matthew 20:17-28*

### **I. Contrary to cultural expectations, Jesus predicts His death; 20:17-19.**

*<sup>17</sup> Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, <sup>18</sup> "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death <sup>19</sup> and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

With the crucifixion in Jerusalem only weeks away, Jesus takes aside the Twelve to give them another prediction of His impending betrayal and death. Even considering Jesus' recent teaching, His upcoming betrayal and death, and His example of counter-cultural living, the disciples still argue about their status and privilege.

### **II. Status in the kingdom of heaven is contrary to culture; 20:20-23.**

*<sup>20</sup> Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. <sup>21</sup> "What is it you want?" he 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." <sup>22</sup> "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. <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."*

As Jesus gives the prediction of His impending crisis in Jerusalem, the mother of Zebedee's sons, comes up to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of Him. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, along with Peter and Andrew were the first disciples called. This woman has been a faithful follower of Jesus, and feels she has the right to get preferential treatment.

The mother's request for a favor is blunt. She is not pushing her sons into something that they do not want, but together they are demonstrating their commitment to support Jesus in what lies ahead. Seated at the right-hand side is the most typical place of honor. The left side is reserved for the second highest position of importance. She does give Jesus the option of which seat to choose.

Jesus addresses the brothers directly. They and their mother have no idea of what lies ahead. Jesus is referring to His upcoming cup of suffering on the cross, to which He has just given His third prediction. The brothers' response, "We can," indicates that they misunderstand Jesus to be challenging them to see if they are willing to endure the difficulties that lie ahead in the battle to establish God's ultimate kingdom.

Jesus looks to a time when the brothers will suffer for the kingdom of heaven. James became the first martyr of the church, and John experienced persecution and exile. Jesus has come to fulfill the task assigned by the Father, which is not the path of glory but of servanthood. The disciples will see that there is no less requirement of submission for them as well.

Jesus predicts His suffering and death; they hear glory and honor awaits them. They want to make sure they get the status and influence they deserve. Following Jesus is not a religious path to get our way over others, or to get what we want. It's not a journey of status and glory as the world sees it. It is servanthood and submission. It's living counter-cultural.

### **III. Kingdom status is found in servanthood; 20:24-28.**

*<sup>24</sup> When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- <sup>28</sup> 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."*

The other ten disciples react out of jealousy. All of them still suffer from the same concern for status. They were first, so they deserve more. In response to the disciples' concern for status, Jesus sets out the radically different value-scale of the kingdom of heaven: counter-cultural living.

Jesus confronts their ambitions by making a contrast between the world's concept of greatness and that in the kingdom of heaven. Greatness among the Gentiles was measured by being in a position to lord it over others and exercise authority over others. The worldly do what is necessary to get their way and to have their desires met by others.

Jesus gives a different and shocking type of ambition that must be the highest value among His disciples: "*Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.*" A servant worked for hire to maintain the master's home and property, while a slave was forced into service. In human eyes, service is not dignified. These are two of the lowest positions in society's scale, yet Jesus reverses their status in the community of His disciples to being "great" and "first."

Jesus' disciples have the ambition to be greatest and to be first, so Jesus gives them the means by which they can do so according to the values of the kingdom of God. They must arrange their lives with the goal of giving themselves for the benefit of others - not just others who are like them or agree with them.

The ultimate example is Jesus' own life: "*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*". Jesus will give His life as a "ransom", a word often used of the money paid for the release of slaves.

The human concern with status and importance is clearly one of the most fundamental cultural values which must be unlearned by those who belong to God's kingdom. Jesus set out a sharp contrast with the way earthly kingdoms and authority structures operate, and the contrast is clearly focused in the words "It is not to be like that among you." It sums up the character of Jesus' disciples as counter-cultural.