

Part 36: Kingdom Clarity

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"I am William Wallace. And I see a whole army of my countrymen here in defiance of tyranny. You have come to fight as free men, and free men you are. What would you do with that freedom? Will you fight?"

"Fight? Against that? No, we will run; and we will live.

"Aye, fight and you may die. Run and you'll live--at least a while. And dying in your beds many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!"

For many of you, you may be very confused right now. For others, you may be ready to run into the field of battle to defend your freedom from the forces which threaten it. This short speech, from Braveheart, is the final address William Wallace gives to his Scottish resistance as they face the final battle and overwhelming forces of the English army.

This speech is a favorite of many because it captures so passionately the cry of the underdog in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. And this speech today is an important contrast to what we are going to see in the gospel of Matthew.

As Matthew has been telling the story of Jesus Christ, we have witnessed opposition from the Jewish religious officials. We have felt the people pining for relief from the forces of Roman occupation. And now Jesus and his own army of misfit followers are marching on Jerusalem. The city of power for both Roman influence and religious influence.

This is their final battle field. The crowds have gathered. The disciples have been promised a Kingdom. What will this Jesus say? How will the ultimate William Wallace muster up the forces of his troops? Well, read with me the war cry of the King of Kings as he prepares to enter Jerusalem: **Matthew 20:17-19**.

I imagine this message was met with much less cheering. Where William Wallace held out the possibility of victory, Jesus pointed out the certainty of death.

"Behold, here we go," Jesus says. This was the destination that I'm sure every disciple had in mind when they started following a man who claimed to be king. This is what most people do when they follow a savior. We have our own perceived needs that make up the walls of our own Jerusalem.

We want the sickness removed, we want obstacles obliterated, we want our marriages repaired, and we want purpose restored. But what Jesus just outlined as the end, was not the end his disciples hoped.

This is the third time in the book of Matthew Jesus has publicly predicted his death, but here, on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus' emphasis gets clear. He is going to be delivered over to the chief priests, and they will not crown him, they will condemn him. Then he will be delivered over to the Roman, pagan, Gentiles, and he will not rule over them. They will mock him, flog him and crucify him.

He won't die as a noble soldier. He will die shamefully, without the shred of nobility or honor on the cross of a petty criminal. The tone of this text isn't active resistance, it is passive plundering. He will be delivered, he will be condemned, he will be crucified.

But also buried inside this passivity is the promise of divine passivity. Yes, he will be delivered by the hands of another, but in the end, he will also be raised by the hands of another. Still, in light of this hope of a raising, the disciples are uncertain of the game plan. They aren't struck with the same force Wallace's soldiers are.

In fact Luke says this: **Luke 18:34**. By the standards of the world, this Jesus and his Kingdom seem backwards. By the hopes of those who wish to follow Jesus, it seems confusing. As someone who is not a believer you may hear the truths of what we proclaim, that we read a book written thousands of years ago and worship a man who was killed. Certainly there is something odd about this.

For those who are believers in here, you may, just like the disciples be confused at the amount of seeming opposition and lack of power you experience as a child of this long promised King. But in light of Jesus' bold claim to his disciples, he is going to show them and us three hidden realities which only makes sense in the Kingdom of God.

On the road to the cross we are going to learn three things about Jesus, his Kingdom, and his power. As a whole we are going to see this: **To see God's kingdom clearly, we must see the cross of Jesus clearly.** The three truths we are going to see as Jesus enters Jerusalem are: Kingdom status is through suffering, Kingdom power is by service, and Kingdom progress is through mercy.

What do we make of this kind of King? Matthew is going to help us understand by sharing clarifying scenes with us in his book.

The first story emphasizes our first point today: **Kingdom status is through suffering**. Read with me **Matthew 20:20-21**.

So here we see Jesus predicting his death, and then we see a request about status in his kingdom. This isn't new in Matthew's gospel. In fact look back at **Matthew 17:22-23, 18:1**.

What's interesting in both of these circumstances is that the idea of Jesus' death causes people to consider their own role in his kingdom. After each instance people want to know: what does this mean for me? And what is interesting in each response from Jesus is that he doesn't rebuke the desire.

Certainly in both cases there are aspects of pride, but Jesus doesn't rebuke a desire to be great. Instead he stresses the posture and the position of those who would be great. In other words the question isn't "who will be great?" In Jesus' mind anyone who comes to him in faith is like this child is great because they are in his kingdom. Greatness is a given. The question is "how will I be great?"

So here in Matthew 20, we see the mother of two of Jesus disciples come to Jesus with her boys and ask him if they can be his vice-regents in his new kingdom. Can they sit in the places of honor? Jesus again is going to address the posture of greatness. Look at how he responds: **Matthew 20:22-23**.

Now in one sense, because we are New Testament believers, we know the cup Jesus is referring to and we scoff at the arrogance of James and John in answering Jesus' question. But remember what we just looked at last week: **Matthew 19:21-22**.

Another man came to Jesus looking for something, but he was unwilling to do what Jesus asked him. But here we see Jesus speaking in vague generalities, and the two brothers say: "Whatever it is, we will do it." This is admirable. It is not arrogance so much as it is ignorance.

And that's what Jesus points out. They do not know what it means to be great. To be great in God's kingdom isn't to be elevated to a high status like it is in our day. Our world says one of the immediate benefits of greatness is a sparing of suffering. We have employees who can do the work we don't want to. We have funds to deal with the messes we don't want to clean up. We have fans to attack the critics we are frustrated with. We have vacation homes to harbor us from the seasons we don't like. Our high status removes us from the trivial trials of life.

But Jesus turns this paradigm on its head. And he does so with the illustration of a cup. To be great, to have status, you must drink the cup. In the Old Testament there are a few times where this cup is an allegory for blessing. But more times than not, the cup from which we drink is the cup of suffering.

Jesus says to James and John: will you suffer? They say, "Yes, we are able." And then Jesus says, "You will drink my cup." Those who follow Jesus will drink the cup of suffering.

For many Christians our status as members of God's kingdom will not be a visible position of status in the world. If your hope in following Jesus is to be seen as a figure of authority, visible blessing and privilege in the eyes of the world, you are not able to be great in God's kingdom.

In fact in Hebrews 11 we read of heroes of our faith, and the majority of them were not esteemed by our world, yet they were great in God's. James would be the first disciple martyred for his faith in Jesus. John would die in exile for his faith. If you want greatness in God's kingdom, it might mean suffering in this one.

On the cross Jesus is going to suffer, and it is through that suffering that he will be made the greatest. We must not think this is an anomaly in the Kingdom of God. Martin Luther says, "The flesh ever seeks to be glorified before it is crucified." But if we wish to follow Jesus, we cannot assume this to be our reality. The status mark of following Christ is suffering with and for Jesus.

Now after dealing with James and John and their mother, the other disciples heard this. And look what happened: **Matthew 20:24-28**.

The disciples hear the discussion Jesus is having with these three, and they don't hear the humility in Jesus' answer, all they hear is a power battle for greatness. So Jesus again calls them to himself and he provides our second point today: **Kingdom power is by service**.

There is a battle for power going on even among Jesus' disciples. And so often this can be in our own midst too. We can think that we must be the noblest church member, the most visible evangelist, the most quotable tweeter. And these positions of power then subjugate those around us. We use the power of our status as tools for our own benefit.

Remember it was just one chapter ago where Jesus promised that his twelve disciples would reign with him on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. What does this power look like?

The world holds the commodity of power and uses it to leverage ourselves and to obligate those who are under us. Power is served. But Jesus says this is not what power looks like in God's kingdom.

Our world today is keenly aware of the danger of power. But Jesus doesn't solve the issue like our world wants to. The word says we must destroy power and status in all areas. But that's not what Jesus says. That is too binary. He says "In my kingdom there is greatness and there is power, but it is not as the world has perverted it." He again goes towards the posture of those who wish to be great. The solution isn't the removal of power, but the restoration of what power, position and status were always meant to do: to glorify God and serve others.

This is what we have been stressing for a number of weeks now at Sovereign Hope, and you see why it is an emphasis. It is not a novel concept to have our relationships shaped by the glory of God and the love of others. It is a biblical principle which shows up everywhere. But what we must see is how Jesus not only redefines power and greatness, but how he redefines the service.

He places himself at the center of it [just as the son of man]. Why do we humble ourselves, even if we are in positions of authority and power and serve others? Because Jesus did that for us. And here in stunning clarity Jesus provides the reason for his death he just predicted.

Look back at **Matthew 20:28**. Where do we turn to in order to see power manifesting itself in service? We turn to the cross of Jesus. Jesus will go to the cross in order to be a ransom for man.

The word ransom implies a debt or obligation which needed to be overcome. This means that Jesus' death is not only a sign that says how much he loves us. This means that Jesus' death is not only an example of humility and trust. This means that Jesus' death on a cross was a necessary act to ransom us from our sin. The cross certainly shows us how much Jesus loves us, but it also shows how much trouble we were in. We didn't need a nudge in the right direction. We needed a ransom.

He served us by paying for the punishment for our sins in his body on that shameful and cursed tree. This is the second reality of the cup Jesus just talked about. Not only was the cup in the Old Testament a cup of suffering, it was a cup of punishment.

Even the smallest sin against God, warrants God's punishment. And all of us are born sinners. We are born enslaved. Held hostage. Kidnapped from what God originally designed for us. And this kidnapping isn't passive, it is active. We chose to sin. We choose to worship other gods.

And look at what stands against us: **Isaiah 51:17-20**. My bet is if James and John would have been thinking of this scripture, they would have been less eager to answer the way they did. But look at what God promises will happen to his people: **Isaiah 51:21-22**.

God is going to give the cup to another. The full cup which we needed to drink to its dregs, is going to be taken from our hand and given to another. This is what Jesus did on the cross for us.

Last week we saw Jesus saying that for anyone who left home, houses, family and comforts for his name's sake will receive eternal life. But here is Jesus, the one who in order to serve us, left his home, his family, and his comfort in order to drink the full cup of God's infinite wrath you deserved.

So knowing this, why did Jesus tell James and John they would drink of this cup? Look at what is going to happen a few chapters later, on the night before the crucifixion: **Matthew 26:27-29**.

We will drink the cup of Christ, because Christ has drank the cup of wrath for us. We will drink it by the blood of Christ and not by our own blood. That's power. Power to overcome such an infinite problem. And that power was executed for you.

You want to be great? Do you desire to be first? Then serve out of an overflow of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the power of the kingdom. It is for our good to both receive it and to live it out.

In closing we see not a teaching, but an example of the final point of God's kingdom: **Kingdom progress is in mercy**.

Listen to this story: **Matthew 20:29-34**.

Some scholars have found literature which seems to imply that Jericho was home to some sort of balm which would help with headaches, cataracts and dimness of vision. So here outside Jericho lay two blind men who despite their attempts to find healing, cannot find it in the kingdom of man. They are powerless in their affliction.

A great envoy of willing and healthy followers are trailing Jesus to his death. This zealous crowd is following Jesus to what they hope will be the final blessed rule of whatever king they hope him to be. They tell these men to be quiet because they want the reward! And this great crowd is contrasted by the lowly state of these two men. In their current state, they are outcasts without any cultural status to be noticed.

But the plea for mercy from these two powerless, outcast blind men causes Jesus to stop. Jesus didn't provide the status the Zebedee family wanted, Jesus didn't heed the power struggle of the twelve, and Jesus didn't affirm the zealous action of the crowds. Instead Jesus answers the broken pleas for mercy. This is what our King and his Kingdom is about.

You want status, you will get it, though not as the world perceives it. You want power, you will have it, though not as culture sees it. You want mercy, and you will find it in the very place which makes sense of everything else: at the hands of Jesus.

And in seeing this Jesus with new eyes, the two men follow him. With his mercy, their powerlessness and lack of status were overcome. In Jesus' mercy he stopped the caravan to solve the affliction of blindness so that these men might see. And on the cross Jesus stopped the whole world to solve spiritual blindness so that you might see.

The crowd rebukes these men because there is greater work to do for we are going to Jerusalem. But Jesus says, this is my work. And he opened their eyes, and they become his disciples.

Is that you? Has Jesus touched your eyes in his loving-pity to give you eyes to understand this kingdom? We cannot see the kingdom of God properly if we do not first see the way in which cross redefines God's kingdom through Jesus Christ. We must see his cup, we must be served by his ransom, and we must receive his healing. Have you done that?

You were made for greatness. You were made for status. You were made for power. But it's only Jesus and his counter-cultural cross which can provide them to us, on his terms, for his glory and for the love of others. See this King. Model his Kingdom. Receive his mercy.

It is only when we see Jesus in all these realities that we can understand the triumphal entry of this kind of King. As difficult as it may be to see, this King has come. His Kingdom is here. And he wants to give us eyes to see it.