

Matthew 20:17-28

“...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As many of you already know, the Bible is the best-selling book of all time – 168,000 Bibles are sold or given away each day, in just the United States alone. It is the oldest book with the most number of ancient copies. It has been translated into more than 1200 languages and more translations are done each year. It has been quoted throughout history more than any other work. But of course, that means that it is the most often misquoted, too.

Maybe you’ve heard the expression: God moves in mysterious ways. While seemingly a universal confession among Christians, this phrase is not from Scripture. There is a *similar* phrase in Isaiah 55(:8): **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.** But the more likely source of the phrase is William Cowper’s hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way, his wonders to perform.”

Or how about the phrase “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” Also, not in Scripture. Samuel Butler, a 17th century British poet, actually coined the phrase “spare the rod and spoil the child” in his satirical poem, “Hudibras”. But again, there *is* a *similar* passage to be found in the Bible. Proverbs 13:24 states: **He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.**

Another so-called Bible Verse is: Pride goes before the fall. This one is *almost* correct. Proverbs 16:18 reads, **Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.**

But I think the one I hear the most is this: God helps those who help themselves. It is often quoted, but not from Scripture. It actually has its source in ancient Greek mythology. It comes from the story of Hercules and the Waggoner. In the story, a man’s wagon gets stuck in mud. No matter how hard the horses pull, the wagon just won’t budge. In frustration, the waggoner cries out to the gods for help. Hercules responds saying, “Put your shoulder into it and help. The gods help those who help themselves.”

That may have been the belief in ancient Rome, but does it hold true in our text for today? When Salome came to Jesus on behalf of her sons,

in a way, she was putting the phrase into practice. She was taking the opportunity to put her sons’ request forward. And in fact, Jesus had said, **You do not have because you do not ask.** Matthew tells us that the mother of James and John asked, **Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.**

I believe we call that *assertive* in our society. One might even express appreciation for her boldness. And it was certainly a family trait. You may remember that James and John, at one time, wanted to call down fire on some Samaritans because they didn’t welcome Jesus into their village. Jesus himself gave them the nickname Sons of Thunder. And the truth is, their request was coming from a desire to give themselves completely to the service of their Savior King.

The problem was, they still didn’t understand the nature of Jesus’ service to humanity. And so Jesus doesn’t chide Salome for making her request. Jesus doesn’t embarrass her sons for their desire. Rather, he seizes the moment to teach and gets right to the heart of the matter **“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”** In other words, as Jesus points out a little later, are you willing **to serve** rather than **be served**, no matter what?

Matthew tells us **When the ten heard about [the request], they were indignant with the two brothers.** Knowing what we do about the other ten, one might wonder whether the other disciples were indignant from righteous anger or were they indignant because they hadn’t thought of it first. Jesus’ conversation may give some insight. He said, **You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸ 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.**

All of a sudden that phrase we looked at before, “God helps those who help themselves”, sounds way off the mark, doesn’t it? The believer’s life of faith is to be a life that imitates Jesus and serves. Again, **the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.**

But it is so hard, isn’t it, to be truly and *only* service minded? Some time ago I encountered an article about why people leave churches. The article

listed the following reasons: 10% leave to go be with the Lord (That one I can understand and I wouldn't take it away from anyone for a even a second!); 12% leave due to a job relocation (I suppose you can't do much about that.). But the other two, the remaining 78%, are directly addressed by our Savior's words today. You see, 12% leave because they have found another church that they prefer and 66% leave because they are offended. You know, kind of like the disciples were indignant at James and John.

Let me put it another way: people leave a congregation either because they feel they weren't well-served by the church or because they feel that they can be better served by a different one. Did you catch that? Either way, people tend to leave because they don't like how *they* are being served!

Oh, I know, some might be thinking, "Well, what if they're going to another church because they want better opportunities to serve others?" But think about it, isn't even that really about wanting to serve in ways that *they* want to serve rather than taking Paul's advice to the Ephesians to build others up **according to their needs**? Again Jesus said, ***the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.***

And it's not just among people who leave churches. The truth is, we're all guilty of complaining about church and how we're being served. We're all guilty of misquoting and twisting Scripture to make it say what we want it to say rather than what God intends. We're all guilty of criticizing and gossiping and second guessing. We're all guilty of looking **to be served** rather than looking for ways **to serve** others **according to their needs**.

Thank God that our Jesus not only **came...to serve** but also **to give his life as a ransom for many** according to *our* needs. Thanks be to God that our Jesus willingly and lovingly went **up to Jerusalem, ...[to] be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law...[to be] condemned ... to death¹⁹ and ... turn[ed] ... over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified**. Jesus served you and me by becoming one of us, by living a life of innocent service and pure motivation, by sacrificing himself in our place, and finally, by taking up his life again, to guarantee that our lives would not be lost for eternity.

And now, we are called on to imitate his service to us, to carry our crosses as he did, and to love one another as he has loved us. Through Paul, Jesus says, ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or***

vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3) And through Peter, Jesus says, ***Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others.*** (1 Peter 4:10) And again through Paul, ***You... were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*** (Galatians 5:13)

And do you want to know another beautiful part? I see it happening right here among us in the countless ways you serve one another and those around you and am so very thankful that so many of you are ***Be[ing] imitators of God... as dearly loved children² and [living lives] of love, just as Christ loved [you] and gave himself up for [you] as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*** (Ephesians 5:1-2)

And for those wishing to join in the joy of serving others, too, case for Christ author Lee Strobel suggests this acrostic memory trigger. He says to HELP – H.E.L.P. – HELP others:

**Heaven's
Example
Loves
Perfectly**

By following Jesus' example you demonstrate his perfect love at work *in* you and *through* you. God doesn't help those who help themselves. He helps those he loves through those who love all those he has helped. In other words, love as you have been loved. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Serve as you have been served. God grant it. Amen.