

2021

Week 1: Understanding Jesus

We are calling series 2021 for two reasons. #1. It will begin with chapters **20 & 21 of Matthew**. Why these? Because 20 is the last chapter before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is the week before Palm Sunday. Next week we will cover 21, which contains the traditional Palm Sunday story with the donkey, the crowd, and Jesus entering Jerusalem a week before his crucifixion and resurrection. **Get it, 2021**, which also happens to be the year we are in. #2. I believe that if **there were ever a year** that the death and resurrection of Jesus matters, it is now. **It's a story about a willingness to sacrifice out of love** for others as well as one that describes **how life can come out of suffering and death**. Do you get the connection?

Here's my **2021 Lenten challenge**. Read **these two chapters** over the next two weeks. **Ask yourself**, what does God want to say to me about my life? What do I need to do to be obedient? Then, after Palm Sunday, I want you to read chapters **22-28**, which is the rest of Matthew. **This will put you in position to hear God's voice as he directs you in 2021**.

In order to understand what Jesus does in these two chapters, we will need to dip back into **chapter 19**.

Chapter 19 ends with Peter asking a very simple question that was probably on the other disciples minds, **"We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?" Matthew 19:27** This is the classic **"what's in it for me,"** statement. **Now, I'm not suggesting** that Peter and the others haven't given up everything because of the belief in Jesus. I'm also not suggesting that they are only in it for advancement.

Here's Jesus' answer. **Jesus replied, "I assure you that when the world is made new and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many**

who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then. Matthew 19:28-30

"Oh yeah, we are going to get rewarded. But what was that stuff about the most important becoming the least important? Whatever, did you hear about the thrones, houses, family, and "a hundred times as much"? He even used the word inheritance!"

Keep in mind that Jesus spent the **first half of his public ministry talking about the Kingdom of God.** This is the context of Israel being under the boot of Rome. There is this **message of a messiah, a great king/leader,** who will set the people free again. **Most believed that this would be a military/political leader** who would kick the Romans out and put Israel back on top where they belong, like the days of the great Kings David and Solomon. On top of all of that, Jesus has told them that they are **heading for Jerusalem** where kings are crowned.

Matthew 20 begins with Jesus teaching a parable about a landowner who hires workers. This parable begins like most of his by saying, **"The kingdom of God is like."** He goes to where people are waiting for day labor. He hires a crew and promises them what would be the going rate for a day's work. At 9:00 a.m., he goes through the market and sees others waiting for work. He hires them. He does the same thing at 3:00 p.m. and at 5:00 p.m. At the end of the day, he gathers them all together to receive their pay. He brings the ones who came at **5:00 up first and pays them a whole day's wage.** Then when it's time to pay the men who were there all day, the owner pays them the same amount, a full day's pay.

"He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage?' ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?' ¹⁶ "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last." Matthew 20:13-16

Let's continue reading. **As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside privately and told them what was going to happen to him. ¹⁸ "Listen," he said, "we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man**

will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. ¹⁹ Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged with a whip, and crucified. But on the third day he will be raised from the dead."

So we have this all set up with the question, what is in it for me. Jesus says some stuff that they interpret with a big fat "yes"! Then there is this strange parable followed by Jesus telling them that bad things will happen to him in Jerusalem.

Next, people start lining up for their just deserved rewards for leaving everything to follow Jesus.

²⁰ Then the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus with her sons. She knelt respectfully to ask a favor. ²¹ "What is your request?" he asked. She replied, "**In your Kingdom**, please let my two sons sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left." ²² But Jesus answered by saying to them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the **bitter cup of suffering** I am about to drink?" "Oh yes," they replied, "we are able!"

²³ Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from my bitter cup. But I have no right to say who will sit on my right or my left. My Father has prepared those places for the ones he has chosen." ²⁴ When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, **they were indignant.** ²⁵ But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world **lord it over their people**, and officials **flaunt their authority** over those under them. ²⁶ **But among you it will be different.** Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. ²⁸ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:17-28

That is very predictable, that as soon as someone says, "what's in it for me," then people start jockeying for position. They are trying to get theirs. **Again, it's not that they didn't really believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. They just started thinking about where they would be when this kingdom he was describing was about to happen. After all, there's that stuff about thrones.**

Keep in mind that Jesus knows these men and women who are following him better than they know themselves and he knows what future awaits in Jerusalem. Jesus knows what he wants to teach them now so that they will be able to understand what is happening when they come to Jerusalem. He knows that they are thinking of a physical kingdom, where they are sitting on literal thrones ruling the new Israel, minus the control of Rome.

He wants them to be able to understand who he is and what his kingdom is really about as they start to move toward Jerusalem. Jesus wants to teach them three very important lessons that will enable them to work through the coming weeks. These same three lessons are crucial for us to continue to learn as we go deeper into what God has for us in 2021.

To understand Jesus and his kingdom in 2021...

1. Gratitude must exceed "that's not fair."

Let's read it again. "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?" Matthew 19:27

Have you ever noticed that gratitude is about what we've already been given and fair treatment is what we hope to get, based upon our own scale? It's based upon expectation and comparison. The disciples are not focusing on what they have been given, but what they will get when Jesus sits on the throne in Jerusalem and the Romans are on the run.

Have you also noticed how we hear what we want to hear? Or is that just my kids? The disciples heard about the incredible inheritance that was waiting for them as Jesus' followers. They heard that they "will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life."

And then, there's that stuff about sitting on thrones ruling over the tribes of Israel. Do you think they might have misunderstood what that meant? That's what they are now expecting. Literal thrones, and they are the princes and Jesus is the king. That seems fair for all of their loyal

service, for leaving their families and jobs and for being the first ones in that they should be on top.

"...the sons of Zebedee (with their mother) illustrate that the disciples are motivated by the desire for just recompense because of their sacrifice of discipleship (19:27; 20:20-21). That motivation is a stock value of the world, but Jesus turns it upside down. Yes, rewards will be given for faithful and sacrificial discipleship. But if obtaining rewards is the motivating force, it will destroy unity by producing envy, comparison, self-promotion, and competition." (672) **And that is exactly what happened.**

Here's how Jesus ends this weird and uncomfortable parable where everyone gets the same pay for different amounts of work. "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage?' ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?' ¹⁶ "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last." Matthew 20:13-16

The parable is about being grateful that you were chosen and for what you already have. You have Jesus, that is all anyone needs. And because you have Jesus, you are a part of his kingdom, which is the restoration of God's rule over all things. Your inheritance is the family business and the kingdom, which begins now, and stretches through eternity!

"The profound significance of gratitude is that it impacts not just the one toward whom we should be grateful but all other relationships as well." 675

Grateful people are happier, have better relationships, and they tend to live longer.

Sometimes all we think about during this pandemic is what we have lost. Our focus goes there and then it naturally goes to what I expect should happen for me in the future. Yes, you and I missed out on some things, but if we aren't burying our heads in the sand, we won't miss Jesus and his kingdom, but we need to learn the lesson of gratitude first.

To understand Jesus and his kingdom in 2021...**Serving must exceed position and power.**

As a youth pastor, I tried to teach this principle to our student leaders. Our student leaders were the ones who made a higher commitment, which meant meeting together for discipleship and planning. We called this Team Doulos. In the New Testament, this is the Greek word for servant or slave, **which is the position Jesus took.**

Jesus replied, "I assure you that when the world is made new and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Matthew 19:28 Judging means ruling. **These are positions of power in their minds.**

When Jesus talks to James and John after their request to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in his kingdom he challenges them with this. "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." Matthew 26:39

The cup is about destiny, which can be for blessing or adversity/suffering. When the disciples say that they can in fact drink from this same cup **they most likely understood that there would be both blessing and adversity** in establishing Jesus' kingdom. **Jesus is talking about what he must suffer because he is the king. Being in his position means he will drink this bitter cup of suffering.**

Jesus does say about James and John...²³ **Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from my bitter cup. Jesus is speaking prophetically,** knowing that James will be the first martyr in Acts 12:2 and John will experience persecution and will be exiled.

"They will share in Jesus' cup of blessing, but they must submit to the Father's will for their future, just as Jesus is doing. 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." 668-9

And what about that contrast Jesus makes in 26 between how the rulers of this world treat people with how Jesus sacrifices for the people from his position of power.

"For oppressed people with such hardships, capturing those positions of power and authority is the best way to gain any measure of self-respect and significance. To pursue those positions of power and authority is an ambition that is valued highly among the power structures of the world." In other words, the prevailing dictum in the world is that ruling, not serving, is the best status for humans. 669

After Jesus heard the disciples stewing over Solome, James, and John, he brought them all together and said this. Their request was for positions of power. But this wasn't the first time this topic came up. Look back at chapter 18...**About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Matthew 18:1**

Seeking position and power over service clearly doesn't play well in a team setting. The other disciples were not happy with James, John, and their mother.

Jesus sets them all straight with these words. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave.²⁸ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." V. 27-28

Servant and slave are the two lowest positions in that culture. Jesus tells them that this is what it means to be on his right hand and left hand. **Serve like me, sacrifice for others even though you were the first one's to follow me.** This is the opposite of a **pyramid scheme**. Those who get in first make all the money, while those who come in later do all the work. Sound familiar?

Jesus is the ultimate example of this. 74 life v. 28 **Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. Philipians 2:6-7**

"a ransom for many"...ransom is the price paid to release a slave. **Jesus doesn't buy slaves because he has a position of power, he buys their freedom.** It's completely opposite of what the disciples thought and it's the opposite of what our culture preaches.

You can't get any closer to Jesus and you can't get any higher position than being a part of his kingdom. We are all children of the same father and disciples of the same teacher. **There's no position to jockey for, you've already got the best one.** 673

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10 **A steward knows that she is not the owner. It's someone else's stuff, I'm just here to care for, or manage it for the owner.**

To understand Jesus and his kingdom in 2021... **We must recognize where our security comes from.**

Security comes when your position is established and you know your identity. I don't have to jockey for a position. **When I'm always wondering how the people in charge feel about me, there will be no security.**

"Since our position is established, we can turn upside down the world's pattern of greatness and find our own greatness in looking for the needs of those within the community of disciples and give ourselves to serve them." I know who I am and where I stand. 673

He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. John 1:11-13

Our position is established first that we are adopted children of God. We are children of a king. We are reborn into this new family by believing, which means trusting and accepting his role as king, authority in our lives.

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ **"Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy."** 1 Peter 2:9-11

Because of God's mercy through Jesus, we have the identity as God's people. We are his royal priests, which means we represent Jesus in this world. We are ambassadors for his kingdom, making it present for others. That is knowing who I am and where I stand. My identity is in being God's child and having Jesus reside in me. "I am one in whom Christ dwells and I live in his unshakable kingdom."

Jesus is our example. He was so secure in his identity and relationship with the father that "he could give himself unreservedly, in spite of his early circumstances, to serve us." Now weakness, a man on the cross is the greatest display of power the world has ever seen. 673

What would it mean for you to get prepared to really understand what Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to do for you?

Moving toward Jerusalem/the kingdom.

Are you misunderstanding what it is that Jesus is doing and what kind of kingdom he is establishing? Here's some help.

- 1. Read Matthew 20-28 between now and Easter.**
- 2. Serve someone who typically serves you.**

The idea that ruling is a better position than serving is so ingrained in our culture and our minds that it takes practice to understand that Jesus is about the opposite. It takes practice, repetition.

- 3. Start a gratitude list of things God has given you already.**

Start listing what you have, what has already been given to you because of Jesus. Start with this one, **"I don't have to pay for what my sin has cost.** And that ...that is if I've repented, trusted him and begun following.