

The Kingdom, Pride & Ambition

Matthew 20

Muddled Disciples

Last year, God taught me a lesson. I so easily forget that I need to depend on God in all things, I am so prone to pridefully do everything on my own. And so God graciously reminded me that I can't do everything in my own strength. He gently revealed to me my limits, so that I wouldn't continue in foolish independence.

I was telling someone about this at the end of this year when it dawned on me that I think God has taught me that lesson every year for the last 5 years!

Do you ever feel like that? As Christians we can be so slow to learn the way of Jesus, we learn the same lessons again and again. We can be such a messy mix of motives, our character full of complex contradictions. Or is that just me?

Which is why I kind of love reading about Jesus' disciples in the gospels. Because I read about them and see that they are muddled disciples like I am. There's the time that Jesus tells them to beware the yeast of the Pharisees, and they think Jesus is berating them for forgetting the bread. There's the time they wonder how on earth a crowd of 4000 people is going to get enough food, when Jesus has already once before fed an even bigger group! They are slow on the uptake, with small faith, learning the same lessons again and again.

But of course Jesus doesn't want them, or us, to remain that way. And what we see throughout the gospels is Jesus patiently presses his disciples towards greater understanding and deeper faith. He gently leads them so that they would follow the way of his kingdom.

That's what we see in this chapter before us today. Jesus' disciples are filled with pride and ambition. They look down on others and they seek to climb over others. They think they are better and they try to raise themselves higher. Again, they are so like us!

But Jesus warns and teaches and leads and guides. So that instead of pride the disciples would marvel at grace. That instead of selfish ambition the disciples would seek to serve. And I'm praying that for us today we would learn from Jesus again this way of grace and service. Whether for the first time, or the fifth time, or the fortieth time, that Jesus would open our eyes so that that we may walk in his ways.

1. Spiritual Pride & The Way of Grace

Let's begin with the problem of spiritual pride. For it's the *pride* of Peter that prompts Jesus to tell the parable of the workers in the vineyard. You see this at the end of chapter 19. Cast your eyes back to verse 27. Having just seen the rich young man walk away, unwilling to give up all his possessions, Peter blurts out, "We *have* left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

Now there's a sense in which Peter is simply looking for some assurance, some certain knowledge of what his future holds – he really had left everything to follow Jesus. But can you also hear the hint of pride? This guy might have walked away, but *look at us, WE* have left everything behind. Surely we deserve some special reward. Peter is just like us: somehow insecurity and pride existing side by side.

And Jesus responds to both. The end of chapter 19 contains these wonderful promises of provision for those who give up anything to follow Jesus. And chapter 20's parable is a warning against pride.

Jesus tells a story about a wealthy land owner who goes out early in the day to find workers for his vineyard. He finds a crew and offers them a denarius: a generous day's wage. And they get to work.

Then Jesus tells us that the landowner goes out again and again throughout the day. He finds people just hanging out in the marketplace with nothing to do, and so he offers them some work as well – and a fair wage for their labours.

Then at the end of the day, he calls everyone together to give out their pay.

Calling the last first, the landowner dispenses a denarius to those who had only worked one hour! Jesus says at this those who had been there the whole day started to rub their sweaty hands together. 1 day's wage for an hours work – imagine what we could get for working the whole day!

But when they are called, they only get 1 denarius too! Let the grumbling begin. It is the universal catch-cry of the human race: *that's not fair*.

"They only worked one hour," they complain in verse 12, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." Their skin is burned, their back aches, their knees creak, their arms hurt. Look at what we have done compared to them, and yet you pay us the same.

What's your gut reaction? Fair? Unfair? Here is how Jesus finishes:

"But the landowner answered them: 'I am not being unfair to you friend. Didn't you agree to work for a Denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous.'"

There's the point. Of course the landowner is not fair! He hasn't set up a meritocracy. He hasn't paid everyone according to what they deserve. But this is not the unfairness of injustice. It is the unfairness of *generosity*.

The problem for the workers is not that they have been underpaid or ripped off. The problem for them is simply the landowner's lavishly generous to *others*. And by being so pridefully self-focussed, they fail to see this glorious generosity for what it is. This is what Peter was in danger of missing, and this is why Jesus told him this parable. Jesus had just spoken of God's incredible grace in chapter 19. Remember Jesus' emphatic statement:

"With man salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

And Peter immediately turns around and starts talking about what *he has* done. Instead of marvelling at the God who gives to the undeserving, Peter wants to make sure he will get what he deserves.

Jesus tells this parable to open Peter's eyes and train his focus on the generous grace of God.

After all, before the workers in the vineyard had ever lifted a finger it was the landowner who came out into the marketplace and called them. And before Peter had given up anything for Jesus it was Jesus who sought Peter and found him and called him to follow. In Luke we read about the miraculous catch of fish Jesus gave to Peter, a catch he could never do on his own. At the end of the gospels Peter will deny Jesus. And he receives forgiveness and restoration from Jesus that he could never earn or deserve. From beginning to end, Peter's life is saturated and sustained and strengthened by *grace*.

And the same is true for us. But it's so easy isn't it, for our focus to shift from God's grace to us, and to focus on our *work & service & sacrifice*?

We look to the spiritual experiences we've had. Or the theological knowledge we have acquired. Or the fruitful ministry we have done.

And a subtle pride can grow. Those who have had certain experiences might look down on people with lots of head-knowledge. And theology nerds look down on those who have shallow experience.

In the first century you might have seen this pride in the arrogance of Jewish Christians towards Gentile Christians.

You might see it today in the snide remarks of Protestants about Catholics. You can have older Christians looking down on naive young Christians. You can have younger Christians looking down on out of touch older Christians. It is subtle. But insidious.

I especially think this sort of pride can grow in small churches like ours. We ought to be very grateful for the deep fellowship and genuine community which has grown up amongst us. But it's easy to drift into prideful comparison. We can say things like: "you just don't get this in many other churches." And it can absolutely lead to grumbling. We can see a bigger church talking about their growth in numbers and say amongst ourselves: but what about us! We trust God's word, we pray, we love each other – *it's not fair*.

How easy it is to become envious that God is generous.

But that kind of envy will eventually rob our Christian life of joy.

See what should those workers have done? They should have run out into the marketplace and told *everyone* about this master who gives anyone a job, and pays everyone the same! You wouldn't believe how generous this guy is – there's a plentiful harvest, and the workers are few, you've got to come work for him.

And so it should be with us. When our vision is filled with God's generosity, our pride will be replaced with praise. When we experience it our lives, and when we see it in the lives of people around us, we will sing the triumphs of *his grace*.

If God treated each of us on our own merit, we would be given nothing except the judgement our sin deserves. How good it is that God is *not fair*.

As we read in Ephesians 2:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that **no one can boast**.*

And so as the apostle Paul writes elsewhere: *let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*.

2. Spiritual Ambition & The Way of Service

The answer to our spiritual pride is to open our eyes again to the way of grace. In the second half of the chapter, we meet the problem of spiritual ambition.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples for the third time what is going to happen to him:

We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!

It's a stunning prediction isn't it. How will the disciples respond to this news of their teacher's suffering? Grief? Sadness? **Greed. Selfish ambition.** Jesus describes his path to the cross. And immediately the disciples clamber over one another jostling for positions of power.

Their ears must still be ringing with the earlier promise of chapter 19 that they will sit on thrones with Jesus in his kingdom. And they've got to thinking – maybe we should secure the *best thrones*. And hilariously they send their MUM to ask Jesus for the positions of power and prestige his right and left hand.

Of course the other disciples are not happy about this. But you get the sense that their anger is not *righteous* indignation, they are thinking the exact same question and are just annoyed that James and John got to Jesus first. They too want the honour and the influence. They want to be respected and recognised. They want to be great!

And this is the way of the world. This sort of ambition is everywhere around us. Just think of the metaphors we use to describe a successful person: they ascended the mountain, they climbed the ladder, they reached the top. We grasp for greatness. We clamber over others in order to make a name for ourselves. And it's so easy for this attitude to creep into church. We can desire to be someone respected and influential in the church community. I can tell you how easy it is for this to become part of ministry. Yes, I want more young people to know Jesus, I want our youth group to grow as more and more teenagers are saved. That is a genuine desire of my heart. But there's also that niggling ambition in my heart to be recognised and respected by ministry peers. For my influence to grow. To be *great*.

All this ambition is a complex thing. The Christian philosopher Jamie Smith notes that:

There's a bundle of hopes and hungers bound up with our ambitions, but so often they boil down to the twin desires to win and to be noticed, domination and attention – to win the crown and be seen doing it.

But this way of domination and attention is not the way of Jesus. In fact Matthew emphasises that Jesus is *on his way*. He is *going up* to Jerusalem, in verse 17. In verse 18 Jesus says the same thing: *we are going up to Jerusalem*. Now that going up was a literal ascent. Jerusalem was geographically higher than the surrounding areas. You have to go **up**. But it was also symbolic. Jerusalem, after all, was the city of *kings*. And Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to establish his kingdom and **ascend** to the throne.

That was his destination. But what way was he going to take to get there? Well, he's already told them it is the way of suffering. He goes on to say that his way is the way of service and of sacrifice.

The rulers of this world lord their power over others, stepping on the people below in order to raise themselves up. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

Jesus would indeed win the crown. But he would win the crown by going the way of the cross. This way will involve drinking the cup of God's judgement against all the sins of the world. The way of Jesus will be to serve by laying down his life as a ransom for many. A ransom price was the cost for setting someone free. It was the cost paid for someone's salvation. And this is how Jesus serves us. By saving us from our sin, and setting us free from all selfish ambition.

But notice that the answer is not to have no ambition at all. Here's Jamie Smith again:

The question isn't whether we aim our lives. Our existence is like an arrow on a taut string: it will be sent somewhere. It's not a matter of quelling ambition, of "settling," as if that were somehow more virtuous (or even possible)....

Resting in the love of God doesn't squelch ambition; it fuels it with a different fire. I don't have to strive to get God to love me; rather, because God loves me unconditionally, I'm free to take risks and launch out into the deep. I'm released to aspire to use my gifts in gratitude, caught up in God's mission for the sake of the world.

Brothers and sisters, the answer to all our misplaced ambition is to embrace the way of service. To pursue the Christ-like glory of sacrifice & the cross-shaped greatness of service. Let's be people ambitious about serving. Let's out-do one another in showing honour. Let's lower ourselves in order to lift others up. And not to enhance our reputation but to enhance the reputation of Jesus, the one who has serve us and saved us. Let us go the way of Jesus.

Model Disciples

Peter, James, and John, and you and me are muddled disciples. And this side of heaven we will always be a messy mix of motives and ambitions. Even our service of God can become a source of pride and self-interest. But our passage ends with real hope of progress as Matthew presents before us two model disciples.

Peter's eyes were so focussed on his own work that he was blind to the generous grace of God. James and John were so focussed on their own position that they were blind to Jesus' way of service.

Now, ironically, we meet two blind men who see with crystal-clear spiritual clarity. They see who Jesus is: The Lord, the Son of David, God's chosen King on his way to bring in the kingdom.

They see that they have nothing to offer Jesus, they can claim nothing by their own merit, and so they simply cry out for mercy.

Unlike James and John they don't send their mum on a sneaky mission, they cry boldly and openly for Jesus to draw near.

Jesus asks them, too, what he can do for them. But instead of asking for honour and status like James and John – they ask for healing and sight.

And receiving the compassion and power of Jesus they set off and follow Jesus along the road.

Here is a model for us to follow as we follow Jesus.

See who Jesus is, see what Jesus has done for you on the cross, cry out to him for mercy, then walk in his ways, moment by moment, day by day.

To finish, hear these words of Philippians Chapter 2:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.