

Matthew 20:20-28 (ESV) – A Mother's Request

Ambitious Mothers in History:

Mother Lu

About 2,000 years ago in China, during the Xin dynasty (9–25 A.D.), Mother Lu's son, who was a district official, was charged with a minor offense and then executed by the district magistrate. Afterward, Mother Lu channeled her upset in an unexpected direction: She raised a force that captured the magistrate in 17 A.D.; in retaliation for her son's death, the man was beheaded.

Mother Lu died shortly after getting her revenge. However, many of the fighters she'd assembled went on to combat the forces of the Xin dynasty (this uprising came to be known as the Red Eyebrows Rebellion because these fighters painted their brows red to try to look like demons). While the Xin dynasty was short-lived for many reasons — its emperor, Wang Mang, was viewed as a usurper; his reforms didn't result in peasant support; and flooding of the Yellow River led to food shortages and unrest — the power of Mother Lu's fury at her son's death also played a part in its end.

Sojourner Truth – *about 200 years ago*

Sojourner Truth gave birth to her children while being held as a slave in New York. Though Truth gained her freedom in 1826, she was forced to leave her older children behind (New York was in the process of gradually abolishing slavery, but people born after July 4, 1799, were required to complete a period of service before being freed). However, Truth was stunned when she learned that her five-year-old son, Peter, had been sent to an Alabama plantation. His sale was not only a moral outrage, but it was also illegal: New York's laws forbade the selling of a slave out of state.

Despite the risks of speaking out, Truth insisted, "I'll have my child again." She filed a complaint with the Ulster County grand jury, then raised money for an attorney. The man who'd sold Peter had likely thought he'd get away with it — many slaveowners in New York disregarded the law because they wanted to get as much profit from the people they owned while they could. But Truth's actions forced the seller to bring her son back to New York.

In the spring of 1828, Peter was returned to his mother. He had scars from being whipped, beaten and kicked during his time in Alabama, but Truth had saved him from a lifetime of such mistreatment.

Mary the mother of the sons of Zebedee

- Sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:25) – present at the cross
- Sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matthew 28:1) – present at the empty tomb
- Made an ambitious request of Christ (Matthew 20:20-28). *This would explain why she felt the liberty to ask Jesus to make her sons, James and John the greatest in the Kingdom.*

Let's read the story of this mother's audacious request! (Matthew

20:20-28)

Context:

1. Jesus and his disciples were heading to Jerusalem (20:18) from Jericho (20:29) for the triumphal entry.
2. Zebedee, the husband of Mary the mother of James and John, (who was very much alive and active when Jesus called James and John to leave the family business and follow Him – Matt. 4:21 and Mark 1:20) is not mentioned in this text... perhaps due to death or responsibility to provide for the family by staying back to work?
3. Out of the 12, James and John were already accepted by Jesus into his inner circle (Peter, James, and John – Matt. 5:37 when the daughter of Jairus was raised to life; Matt. 17 on the mount of Transfiguration; and later in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matt. 26).
4. Jesus already taught the disciples about humility. (18:1-4; 19:14; 19:21; 20:16)
5. Jesus just finished prophesying for the third time (16:21 and 17:22-23) about his death and personal humiliation. (20:17-19)

Why so obtuse? [obtuse = annoyingly insensitive or slow to understand]

Illustration: My response to Heather when she brought home a piece of furniture for our bedroom. It was vintage, large, and extremely heavy. Unfortunately, my response to her fits into the category of OBTUSE!

Application: We all have a tendency to look past what is BEST or CLEAR for what is convenient. We too often go with our gut responses instead of what we know to be true.

This morning, I want you to see that the Way Up is Down! If you want to be great as a mother... SERVE!

Two main points for you to consider:

1. Fight the temptation to promote yourself. (20-25)
2. Find the motivation to serve others. (26-28)

Fight the temptation to promote yourself. (20-24)

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him

*for something.*²¹ And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”

Avoid political manipulation. (20) (*Political maneuvering to achieve your agenda.*)

- **By your actions**

- Sending your mother to speak for you. (Mark 10:35-41 reveals that this desire to be exalted was not reserved exclusively to MOM. James and John desired to be exalted!
- Kneeling before him... giving the appearance of reverence.
 - *Proskuneo* – dropping to her knees, bowing low
 - Waiting for Jesus to respond

- **By your assumptions**

- She asked for confirmation before stating her question.
 - The mother of James and John was the sister of the mother of Jesus.
 - That gives the sons of Zebedee a family connection and therefore the assumption of a special advantage as the cousins of Christ. (John 19:25)

Guard against personal dissatisfaction. (21)

- **Exercising selfish ambition.**

- Attempting to gain the greatest advantage at the best possible moment. *Sometimes resulting from the desire for greater influence in God's economy.*
 - Loyalty (Matt. 19:28 – the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes).
 - Mary believed the words of Jesus about the coming Kingdom.
 - Urgency (Luke 19:11 – As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, AND BECAUSE THEY SUPPOSED THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD WAS TO APPEAR IMMEDIATELY.)
 - Sincerity (Perhaps Mary [with James and John] were reflecting on the OT text that teach about the importance of supporting the leader on the right and left hand
 - Aaron and Hur held up the arms of Moses during the battle against the Amalekites (Ex. 17:12)
 - David was surrounded by his “Mighty Men” (I Kings 22:19)
 - Ezra read the Law to the nation of Israel surrounded by capable men who would interpret it for the people standing on the platform to his right and left.
- Craving for greater prominence. [*Don't hunger for greater prominence.*]
 - **Mary knew that in the kingdom, the throne of Jesus only had room for a person on His right hand and a person on his left hand. One of the three (Peter) would need to be left out.**
- They were not content to sit on thrones.
- They wanted to sit on the thrones closest to the King.
 - *Instead, learn to foster personal contentment.*

²² Jesus answered, **FCF: “You (plural) do not know what you are asking.** Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.”²³ He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”²⁴ And when the ten heard it, **FCF: they were indignant at the two brothers.**

Understand the price of promotion. (22-24)

- Leadership = SUFFERING. (Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink? - 22)
 - The cup: the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39, 42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42)
- Leadership = SUBMISSION or *loss of control*. (You must submit to God’s sovereign plan. - 23)
 - The positions in the kingdom are assigned by the sovereign will of God the Father.
 - Matt. 24:36; 25:34; Luke 12:32; Acts 1:7; Eph. 1:4
 - Their response: “WE ARE ABLE” contrasted with Matt. 26:56 – then all the disciples left him and fled...
- Leadership = SCRUTINY or *criticism and attacks made by others*. (And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. - 24)
 - Like David responding to Nathan in 2 Samuel 112:1ff
 - We all have a tendency to see the very same sins in others that we struggle with the most (Romans 2:1).
 - Perhaps the 10 disciples felt betrayed?

Notice the actions of a gentle shepherd who loves His sheep... Jesus calmly and earnestly reproves and admonishes His disciples...

²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

Avoid leadership exploitation (manipulation). (25-26a)

- Revert to a domineering style of leadership. (25a) – “LORD IT OVER THEM”
 - Become a dictator (very sure of himself) in order to demand attention and gain a following.
 - Constantly reminding their followers of their power and position... oppressive leadership
- Revert to a charismatic style of leadership. (25b) – “GREAT ONES”
 - Become a “personality” in order to gain attention and a following.

Fight the temptation to promote yourself. (20-24)

Find the motivation to serve others. (26-28)

²⁶ It shall not be so among you. **But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,**^{[e] 27} **and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,**^{[d] 28} **even as the Son of Man came not to be served**

but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Consider your desires. God delights to work in you. (a desire for an expanded platform to serve) [26]

Reflect on your actions. God desires to work through you. (be a servant “diaconate”; be your slave “bondservant”) [27]

- “Greatness consists in self-giving, in the outpouring of the self in service to others, for the glory of God.” [Baker NT Commentary].
- “Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels for the glory of God.” – Warren Wiersbe (*On Being a Servant of God*)
- To be great means to love... the leading fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22.

Examples of loving servant leadership:

- Abraham (Gen. 13:8-9 - giving to Lot; Gen. 14:14-16 – rescuing Lot; Gen. 18:22-33 – praying for Lot)
- Moses (Ex. 32:32 – willing to sacrifice his life for the grumbling malcontented people around him)
- Samuel (I Sam. 7:5 – praying for the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines)
- David (Psalm 23 and 103)
- Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:4ff)
- The Commended Centurion (Matt. 8:5-13)
- Barnabas (Acts 4:36)
- Stephen (Acts 6:8)
- Paul, Silas, and Timothy (I Thess. 1:1, 9; 2:1-12)
- Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:18)
- Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8; Phil. 4:12-13)
- Luke (Col. 4:14)

It is the inverted pyramid, the believer being at the bottom – being the servant, the humble attendant of others...

Meditate on the Gospel. God demonstrated His work for you. [28]

²⁸ **even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

- **The Son of Man** (a reference to Daniel 7:14... his favorite designation for himself)
- **Came not to be served but to serve** (the example of Jesus through his incarnation [Phil. 2] and through his ministry such as in washing feet [John 12])
- **And to give his life**
 - Jesus submitted to the will of the Father... no one forced him to die on the cross!
- **A ransom for many.**
 - **Ransom** – substitutionary atonement. The ransom was paid not to Satan (as taught by Origen) but to God the Father (Romans 3:23-25)
 - **For many (a reference to the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53:11)**
 - Many includes: “my people” (Isaiah 53:8); “his people” (Matt. 1:21); “the sheep” (John 20:11, 15; “the church” (Eph. 5:25); “the church of God” (Acts 20:28); and “God’s elect” (Rom. 8:32-35)
 - **For all?**
 - John 1:29; 3:16; 6:51; Hebrews 2:9; I Timothy 2:4 and 6 (turn to)

- **Reconciliation:** I Timothy 4:10

¹⁰For to this end we toil and strive,¹⁰ because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Apply the Text:

- Mary and Zebedee were willing to allow their sons to leave the family business (Matt. 4:21-22)
- With regard to greatness, James was the first to be martyred (Acts 12:2) and John became the last of the Apostles to die. He was exiled to Patmos (Rev. 1:9)... he also authored the Gospel of John, I-III John, and Revelation.

- **Be faithful where God has you.**
- **Learn the art of contentment.**
- **Look for opportunities to serve.**
- **Motivate your service with reflection on the Gospel.**