

IF YOU WANT TO BE FIRST...
Matthew 20:20-28

I. INTRO

- A. One of the things really important people hate most is interruptions. So they go to an inner office—and have layers of people—you know, junk yard dog types--to protect their space and protect their time.

-If you doubt me, try to get through to President Barak Obama. He seems like a really nice likable friendly guy—but try to **interrupt** him and you'll probably get shot or tackled by some SS guy who looks like a gorilla makeover. Your chances of getting through hover at, oh, about -5 %!

-Try registering a complaint with the CEO of General Mills—that they burnt your Cheerios; or with the President of Honda—that you have a fantastic new design for the Accord. How many of you think you'll get their personal attention? **Not a chance!**

1. Amazing, isn't it, that God himself shows up on this planet—and **He's interruptible!** People bug him for all kinds of crazy things. No autographs, though.
2. People say things like, "Oh, I don't want to bother God with **this...**" I've realized something over the years; God is **big** enough to be interrupted any time of day or night—by anyone at all. I find that incredibly comforting!

- B. I'm always fascinated when I look at Jesus' life—and realize that—at least from what I can see—He left himself wide open to interruptions. If someone needed him—or wanted him—they just shoved their way through the crowd to get to him. One time he was teaching in a **very** crowded place—and four guys dug a hole in the roof over his head and, like a Mission Impossible move, lowered a paralyzed friend on ropes down right in front of Him! **Very** creative!

-I think to myself—here's the Son of God—can't get **more** important than Him; He's on a mission to save the world and the people in it from destruction—a mission can't get **more** important than that. He has only **three** years to lay the foundation that will have to last **thousands** of years—you can't cut time more closely than that. And **yet**—he was interruptible—to a fault!

1. I sometimes wonder, is my goal in life to keep every unscheduled, unpredictable thing away from my life? And if I do—what will be left? An amazingly clean schedule where I get done what **I** think is important and needs done?
2. Maybe we're missing something? Is it possible that the point of life **is** the interruptions?! Not the tele-marketing kind—the **people** kind. In watching Jesus, I'm convinced that sometimes, in our busyness—people to see, places

to go, things to do—we miss the whole plot of life! I want to keep life sane and manageable—but I don't want that!

3. The interruption we're going to look at this morning is the time when two of Jesus' closest friends interrupted Him with a formal request that was blatantly self-serving and manipulative.

-Surprisingly, the rest of His team was **really** ticked off—but not Jesus. He did, however, use the occasion to teach them and, ultimately—**all** His followers about being servants; something we don't **want** to learn, but desperately **need** to learn.

II. THE DAY THE ORG CHART FLIPPED

- A. At this point in Jesus' story, He only has weeks to live. He's in the final stages of preparing his disciples for his death—and what's ahead for them, too. He's **very** straightforward. They're headed for Jerusalem, and Jesus prophesies in **detail** what will happen to him there; that it will mean rejection, beating, suffering and death. It's after this that James and John come to Jesus and make a blatant grab for power. Let's read the story:

Then the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus with her sons. She knelt respectfully to ask a favor. "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."

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!" 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."

(Matthew 20:20-23 NLT)

1. Jesus once called these brothers, the **Sons of Thunder!** Sounds like a great movie, title, doesn't it? Well, they apparently sucked their Mom, Salome, into a scheme to pressure Jesus into giving them the 2nd and 3rd most powerful places in his Kingdom.

But the Kingdom **they're** expecting is very different than the one Jesus has been talking about. They were thinking of thrones, summer palaces, servants, prestige, power, wealth. Jesus was thinking of crosses.

-Jesus asks them if they can drink from the same bitter cup he will drink from. Don't you find their answer a little glib? **"Yep! We can do it!"** I wouldn't at **all** be surprised if James and John had been passed over by other Rabbi's—the equivalent of saying, "You're nice boys—but not the sharpest knives in the drawer. So, go fishing—have a nice life!" Moms, imagine someone saying that to your kid? "No one's gonna tell **my** kid that they're not good enough!"

-Well, Jesus **totally** bypasses the manipulation thing—and their Mom—and says, "Yep, you **will** in fact suffer with me and for me—they're not given on the basis of whoever asks first. Just because we're related **doesn't mean a thing!**"

2. The other disciples are **really** upset by this—mainly because these guys got to Jesus **first!** In fact, the embarrassing truth is the running conversation behind Jesus' back has been, "Who's the best? Who's the greatest? Who will be Vice-President, Secretary of State, Prime Minister, MP, Vice-Regent? And maybe, **maybe** they were thinking, "Well, if **Jesus** dies—someone will have to take his place. Why not **us?**"
3. So Jesus has to spell out for them just how **different** His people will be from a world system built on hierarchy, power, coercion—this whole **do-what-the-boss-says** kind of authority that **everyone** wants! Jesus lays it out:

When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, they were indignant. 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. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. 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 20:24-28 NLT)

-It's not about running the show. It's not about, "Who's the boss?" It's not about how many people you have working for you. It's not about having the power to get people to do what **you** want. What Jesus is up to is way, **WAY** different than anything else.

He flipped the org chart; and now leaders **serve**. Those who are **first** are the slaves.

-These had to be some of the **strangest** words ever spoken—that the path to **true** greatness—the way to living out the dream God has for this world to make all things right and new and whole—is not us clutching, protecting and grabbing—but **servicing**. Letting go. Giving our lives away.

-Paul, an early leader who once thought that the path to the top was over the backs of others said:

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8 NLT)

-The question is—who do **we** follow? It's not the military world of generals, captains, lieutenants, and grunts. It's not the educational world of Deans, Profs,

Assistant Profs and TAs. And it's not the corporate world of CEOs, COOs, CFOs, presidents and managers and line workers.

We follow Jesus—who could pull rank on **anyone**—but gave it up and became a slave.

-If you want to know what a servant heart looks like—study Jesus—because **following** Him means more than just talking about Him; it means actually **becoming** like Him. A **servant**.

- B. Anyone here who, as a kid, dreamed of one day being a servant? You know, fetching stuff for others, doing the stuff no one else wants to do—basically **taking** orders, not giving them? I didn't either. If you were to ask any group of first graders, **What do you want to be when you grow up?**—I still don't think anyone would say, "I want to be a **servant!**"

- Even if you interviewed servants—I don't think you'd find **anyone** who'd say, "Yep! This is my **dream job!** It's so **cool** having people order me around, tell me what they want, what they like or don't like—telling me to fetch their clothes, plump their pillows, cook their dinners, bring their cars...!"

-In some homes, not ours of course, but **some**—if you ask, "Hey, would you get me a drink?" the instinctive response is, "What do you think I am...your...**servant?**"

1. It's important to understand that servanthood, in Jesus' day, was no more appealing than it is now. Servants were at the bottom of the food chain—and did the jobs no one else wanted to do.

-To be a servant—or a slave—meant that you had to give up your rights to do what **you** wanted to do—**when** you wanted to do it. You had to humble yourself—which is what this passage says about Jesus. He **humbled** himself—and gave his life—centered his life around others.

2. Jesus' teaching that **His** people will be different—that they will **serve** and **not** play power games or wait for others to serve **them**--has been the toughest thing for His followers to do. And you can follow the trail and see what happened. When the church was institutionalized into power—and used power to manipulate people and whole nations--it did **unbelievable** damage, both to people and to the name of Jesus. The finest hours of Jesus' people has been when they've seen themselves as servants—and actually **served** others in Jesus' name.

-Actually—people in general have **always** been at their best when they've centered their lives around others—not themselves.

3. What was Jesus' point? That we just sit around and let other people plan our days for us? Follow others around and just do what they tell us to do? No. He's talking about a **heart attitude**. He's saying that to lead in His Kingdom—to make a difference—to become the person God always planned for you to be—you have to be like Jesus.

-He's saying that ***if you want to be a leader in what He's doing in this world***, you have to be a servant. His servant—serving others on ***His*** behalf—with an eye toward developing them to be what God wants them to be. He's talking about an attitude of humility, not superiority.

-One of the ***toughest*** things we set out to do as we started The Olive Branch is to build the attitude, ***this is not about us*** right into our DNA. That if what we did ***ever became about us***, we would kill it—and God would have to put us on the shelf. Because, see, according to Jesus, God is looking for ***servants***. People who will be His—whether they're in a church lobby—or in cubicle-land; whether they're in a university classroom—or Home Depot.

-Our goal was to come into every gathering—and every setting we found ourselves, not asking, “what can the people here do for ***me?***” —but what can ***I*** do; how can ***I*** help; how can ***I*** serve.

4. And that is ***still*** our goal. Because, see, if it isn't—followers of Jesus will almost ***always*** go back to our default setting. Which is; ***Do I like this? How am I doing today? Does this meet my needs? Does this stimulate me? What about me? What about...*** Sorry! That's not our calling! Because real love ***gives***.

-See, the motive behind serving isn't stoicism. It's love. You can't serve very well without loving; and you can't love very well without serving. You can't love without ***giving***; and you can't give without ***loving***. All of these things fit ***together***.

- C. Let me mention one more thing about our calling. We are CALLED to be a “body.” How many of you this morning have a body? How many of you have either more or less body than you'd like? How many of you think ***having*** a body is probably better than ***not*** having one? I think so too.

1. When it comes to how this massive group of ***very*** different people are to work together, Paul, a leader and writer in the early church uses a word picture that is brilliant. He says, “We, as Jesus followers, are the ***BODY*** of Christ—with it's many, many, MANY different parts. I get a little confused between spleens, phalanges, larynxes and hypothalamus glands—but I ***know*** they're all in here. Except for my appendix. It tried to hijack my body—and had to be thrown overboard.

-I do know this. When all the parts work together in the body and ***serve each other***—it's a ***beautiful*** thing. When they don't—when one part gets infected, like my appendix—man, it can make all the other parts miserable!

-The point of his analogy is that everyone has a unique combination of gifts, skills, personality traits and opportunities—and they should ***use*** those uniquenesses for the glory of God, for the restoration of the world, and for the sake of others.

2. In this analogy Paul used, He had some very specific warnings. One of those warnings was that **because** we are very different from each other—we will have to always be on guard to not use our own uniqueness as a means of criticizing and minimizing others.

-People do that, you know. People whose gifts and passions run hot in a certain direction, whether it's teaching or prayer or mercy **naturally** think that everyone should serve the way they're serving—and they usually have a whole list of Bible verses to show how very much God agrees with them. Our **default** setting is to judge others and the church—and it's ugly and unproductive! Paul says in another writing, "Who are **you** to judge someone else's servant?" In other words—**serve**—and **mind your own business!**

3. Paul says something else. **No one** has the right to minimize their part. "Oh, **they don't need me!**" Question—why did God give you a gift—and me a gift? Because His Body—His people need it! God's Mission in this world is massive—and He has called **everyone** to engage! There **ARE** no wisdom teeth or appendixes. If part of your body isn't working—like it's limp, not moving—is that normal? Of course not!

-I'm going to get **very** pointed here. Are you engaged with everyone else—all the other parts—in Jesus' mission? This is **so** important for your personal health and growth—and for the sake of the **world** Jesus gave His life for!

III. HOW DOES IT WORK?

- A. Last Sunday we celebrated Easter—the day when Jesus walked out of the grave alive—proving that He was, in fact, Lord—not Caesar. All power and authority **had** been given to Him and He had defeated Satan and all the powers of darkness. You'd think he'd stick around—but He didn't. He left everything in the hands of about 120 followers.

-But He was **very** specific: "Don't start this mission without the Holy Spirit." In what would've been the end of May of that year—Pentecost—the Spirit of God was unleashed on this planet through common ordinary people. Because of Jesus—the Spirit came to everyone who would accept Him; let Him dwell in their hearts.

1. In one day—that small group of 120 mushroomed to over 3000 people. The mission Jesus gave them threatened both the religious powers and the political powers. And it got **bloody!** But even in the middle of intense persecution that little group loved it's way into becoming THE prevailing movement on the planet. **That's** what the power of God's Spirit can do when He gets into the everyday speaking, living, serving and loving of ordinary people like me and you!
2. The Holy Spirit is the secret to making a difference in this world. When we believe that Jesus is Lord—and choose Him as **our** Lord—the Spirit takes up residence in our lives. The plan is two-fold. First, He wants to re-create us—make us new. Second—He wants to empower us to have a renewing influence wherever we find ourselves.

-God gave you all your talents, passions, abilities and opportunities to **all** fit together for **His** purposes in this world. The Spirit is the One who empowers who you are—not to make you a shining, popular star—but to make you into a loving, serving, giving part of what He’s up to in the world.

3. Know what He needs most from me—and from you? Our **full** cooperation. Jesus talked about this.

Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. (Luke 9:23-24 NLT)

-What Jesus is saying here is the same thing He said to James and John. Following Him—being a part of what He’s up to means being a servant. **Belonging** to Him. Paul, the leader I quoted earlier, teases this out a little. He says:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2 TNIV)

-Friends, I’m telling you—this **yielding yourself fully to God for whatever He wants** is **not** something you will drift into. But it will be the best decision you ever make.

It’s **after** this that Paul talks about using our gifts creatively to **serve** God and others. Will you do that? Will you give yourself fully to God—and then **SERVE** people He loves—in Jesus’ Name!?

4. When you get a gift from someone, what do you do? It’s pretty simple—even a 2 year old figures this out. You **open** it—and you **use** it! And there are a **lot** of gifts. Let me list a few for you:

***Teaching**—giving talks that help people understand the Bible--is a gift.

***Leadership**—motivating people—and pointing them in a specific direction is a gift.

***Administration**—making sure things are organized and managed efficiently—is a gift.

***Tongues**—the supernatural ability to speak or pray in a language you’ve never learned.

***Wisdom**—this is the gift of problem-solving; supernatural insight

***Mercy**—having extraordinary compassion for people in tough situations—and helping them!

***Prophecy**—the power of God to speak into critical issues and situations with the authority of God behind you.

***Encouragement**—the supernatural ability to help people make good decisions—and not give up.

***Pastor**—having the supernatural ability of gathering people together and caring for them

***Evangelism**—helping people understand the Good News of Jesus and then place their faith in Him

***Helps**—the supernatural ability to see what needs to be done—and assist others in their serving

5. Now, this is just a sampling of the gifts. And I have good news for you. If you have decided to follow Jesus and His Spirit resides in you--**you have at least one gift!** And you have the power of the Spirit to use it.

-This first little group of Jesus-followers stumbled around, found their gifts—and everyone—**everyone** engaged. And we can **still** feel the power behind what they did in Jesus' name by taking on the **opportunities God placed right in their path.**

- B. As I have grown to understand what Jesus is saying, there are two arenas where we serve. The first is—we love and serve and help each other as the Body of Jesus, as the **Church**—those gathered together out of the world system.

1. Individually we sometimes feel small and weak. Want to know why? Because we **are!** The analogy of the **Body** captures this very well. What good is your pinky, all by itself—driving a car or cooking supper? Well, first, it would wither and die; second—it's only helpful when it's part of the **Body!** I **need** you! See, I was meant to be connected to you in vital ways. I need to let you into my life. And you need everyone else here.

-Here's the deal. This only works when **everyone** says, "I'll help! I'll **SERVE!**" Are there those who can't? Of course. For some of you, all this stuff is new. You need **time.** Some of you are gasping for air—you need the support of others. That's why it will take everyone working together for us to all feel that we and those we love are being appropriately encouraged and helped.

-A church is a **body.** We **share** in each other lives in a way this is living and breathing and growing. We **all** need each other!

-So. Would you be willing to come with a servant heart and say, "What can **I** do to help?"

2. But there's a second arena that is critically important—one that churches sometimes many times miss. We are called by Jesus to engage the needs of the world we live in loving, renewing, healing and redemptive ways. Jesus came to bring His Kingdom **here.** His Mission in the world is to bring the **shalom**—the peace, wholeness, love, healing and grace of the Creator into all the places and to all the people who are lost to Him.

-You sometimes hear us say, as you leave a service, that you are being **sent, called** to the place where you **are**—with the power and grace of God behind you. God's love and power always travels with real, live, frail people. People who goof up. People with flawed personalities. People who struggle and fall.

Real people...who will actually **be** real—and who be a willing carrier of **contagious grace!**

a. We carry God's grace back to our homes. You know, don't you, that you are called to be an actual follower of Jesus in your **home** and with your **friends**. They aren't looking for a perfect person—but they are looking humility—and for someone who has a **servant** heart. Someone who's growing, accepting and loving. Our goal is to help you be that kind of person!

b. We also carry God's grace—in our lives—to the places where we work, shop, play—and do life. Jesus has asked those who follow Him to be salt and light; in other words, to use their influence to add flavor and color; to preserve. be salt—something that typically is invisible, but brings flavor; preserves.

-Think about what happens in any setting when someone comes in, not to get their own way and impress—but to **serve**. It's powerful!

c. We also carry the love, compassion, kindness and mercy of God to places where we **intentionally** go—just to serve others. One part of The Olive Branch that has helped **so** much in that area is **Branch Out** under the leadership and passion of John Deacon. We are called, as the people of Jesus, to serve the poor, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, provide shelter to the homeless, and to visit and help those who are sick and in prison.

-**Branch Out** does two things. It exists to help resource each of us in ways that help us **all** serve meaningfully in places we are passionate about. If you don't **have** a place like that—they'll help you find one! We are engaged with so many organizations in the GTA—I've lost count. So has John! Name a helping, serving organization—and we're probably engaged—somewhere! Homeless shelters, food banks, refugees, care homes, AIDS hospices—and now internationally with HATN in two nations.

-Know what happens if we don't get intentional about serving those who most need the Kingdom of Jesus to break through with love and compassion? It never dawns on those in need that God is good—and that God loves them?

-The most painful thing for me to watch has been the decrease in funding for Branch Out—because of the financial crisis our world is in. Let's make sure those who already suffer—don't have to suffer more, okay?

d. The cool thing is that when we engage in any area of this planet that needs renewed—and bring the grace of God--God is pleased and lives are changed! And there is a **lot** of need out there!

3. The two questions I think we secretly ask ourselves—whenever anyone asks us to engage is... **why?** And **how?**

- a. Jesus, for some reason, decided to deal with evil on the earth and reclaim all that has been lost by giving His Spirit to and then working through ordinary people like you and me. And we've got one shot at it—and only one life to invest to change the eternal destinies of others.

-It's very easy to look at the massive need in our world and get overwhelmed. To think, "I can't even make a dent with I have to offer!" But God hasn't **asked** you to do it on your own. He's asked **us** to do it. **Together!** And in the process to grow more and more in love with God and each other. And when we have the guts to do that—**we** grow. And we find a sense of meaning in being a part of something so massive—so world-changing! When you **serve**, you are out on the front edge of your calling as a human being and as a follower of Jesus.

- b. How? It's easy. Look for an opportunity—any opportunity, really—and **do something**. I think it's important to look at things you **enjoy** doing and may already have some skill in. If you aren't good with kids—then Kid's Branch may not be for you!

-My parents gave me a Craftsman toolbox—filled with basic Craftsman tools for Christmas right before I went to university. It was kind of a "grow-up-and-be-a-man, Ken" moment. You need to know—my **brother** was Tim-the-toolman. I was the family clutz. But I realized that I was going to have to maintain my own car—and eventually build my own stuff. And I married someone whose favorite words were, **How hard can it be?** Over time I learned to actually **use** the tools—and **enjoy** the tools. It was a push in a direction I didn't want to go in—but the **right** direction!

-You have a toolbox. You have a combination of gifts, experiences, passions and opportunities—and the power of **God Himself** behind you—to make a difference. My sense, though, is that no one can find out what their gifts are—or what they're passionate about—or what God is calling them to do without just—trying it! Experimenting. Doing something new. Getting out of your comfort zone. And to do that—well, you have to sometimes set aside one of your most valuable assets. Your time. It's possible in a world like ours to be **too** busy—to do the one thing Jesus asked every follower to do. Serve. Build a servant's heart.

-If you're too busy to serve—then, according to Jesus, you're too busy to be great. Because, see, Jesus flipped **everything**—and in the kingdom that really counts—being a servant means everything!

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. It's interesting. Jesus disciples heard Him talk again and again and again about serving. Jesus didn't mince words with them—and you'd think they would have gotten the message. Guess what they were doing when they were waiting to receive the bread and cup the night before He died? **Still** arguing about who was greatest! -Know what got through? When Jesus, at that supper, stripped down to his underwear—and did the messy, humiliating job everyone else was too proud to do; wash feet. And when they saw those hands that washed their feet—**nailed** to the cross the next day, **then** they understood—and never forgot.
- B. If you're having trouble with this whole concept of making time and space in your life to be a servant, I want you to imagine God Himself, with a basin and a towel--on his hands and knees in front of you—washing your feet.

-After Jesus had done that for his immediate followers, He said these words:

And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you....Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them. (John 13:14-5, 17 NLT)