

I've got a question for you. Whenever you read... or study Scripture... do you... (*more often than not*)... read to **understand**... or do you read to **verify** your own ideas...? ... Most of us would probably answer that we read to understand... but do you ever ask God to **challenge** your thinking... to **confront** any wrong assumptions... with His Word...? You say... "Well I don't have any!... So why would I ask that...?" Oh **YES YOU DO!** ... We **all** do. Even the best-trained Bible scholars and theologians... can NEVER come to God's Word... and assume that they will not project their own pre-conceived ideas onto the text of Scripture they are reading... or not even **see** what is clearly present in the text.

MANY different factors will skew the way we will notice... (or **not** notice)... or **understand** the Scripture verses we are reading. ... How you and I were raised... what we value in life... our previous learning and thoughts... our previous experiences with life... our current emotion... our present delights or challenges... our dreams and desires... our assumptions... our priorities... and a whole **host** of other factors... will cause us to notice some things... and NOT even see other things. ... Whenever we read Scripture... we unconsciously bring all of **that**... (which is only the SHORT list)... to the Bible text. These (and other) substances cover our eyes like a pair of reading glasses... and affect our perception (by letting **in** certain particulars... and keeping **out** other details)... of what Scripture actually says. Your glasses... which affect the way **you** read Scripture... are **different** than my glasses. (Now... all this does not even take into account what our Spiritual condition is like. Is the communication channel between the Lord and us fully open for us to receive from Him? Is our heart right... or are we in rebellion?)

Researcher Mark Allen Powell had twelve students in a seminary class read the story of the prodigal son from Luke's Gospel... then close their Bibles and retell the story as faithfully as possible to a partner. ...None of the twelve American seminary students mentioned the famine in Luke 15:14... which precipitates the son's eventual return. ... Powell then had one hundred people participate in the same experiment and the results revealed that only six of the one hundred mentioned the famine. The "famine-forgetters"... as Powell called them... had only one thing in common: they were from the United States.

Later Powell tried the experiment in St. Petersburg, Russia. ... He gathered fifty participants to read and retell the prodigal son story. ... This time an overwhelming forty-two of the fifty participants mentioned the famine.

Why? Just seventy years before... 670,000 people died of starvation after a Nazi German siege of the capital city began a three-year famine. ... Famine was very much a part of the history and imagination of the Russian participants.

(LISTEN!) Our experiences and cultural perspectives will not change the meaning of the text... but they will alter what we see in the text. ... As we interpret the text... it's important to keep in mind... the very real possibility of our having hidden assumptions and biases. ... Our passage of study this morning in Matthew 20... will clearly show us our need for careful listening... whenever we come to the Word of God. ... (We will see a very sad example... where this was not done.) ... And since it is a VERY good idea to approach God's Word – **every time** – in prayer... asking God to

humble us... by challenging and confronting any wrong thinking or assumptions... let's do that right now... before we proceed to our Bible text.

- PRAY -

Last week... in Matthew 20:1-16... we were challenged with our assumption that God must abide by our own system of **fair** rewards. He must compensate us on the basis of our perception of what we deserve. And that we are justified if we grumble... when He doesn't. Boy! We need to wipe that smudge off our reading glasses... don't we?

Have you ever felt that God has been holding out on you... that He is not giving you all that you deserve...? (LET ME TELL YOU)... according to Scripture... everyone deserves **damnation!** ... No one deserves salvation. That's justice. ... If you want to appeal for justice... you'll be putting the noose around your own neck! ... We should be thankful that God is "**not fair**"—that is... that He does**n't** give us what we deserve. We should be gushing with gratitude. ... God is infinitely generous and gracious... and will **always** give us **better** than we deserve. (Can I get an "**AMEN!**" to that...?) ... **God's grace is surprising**... it surpasses our normal expectations. ... If you are tempted to grumble about the hand God has dealt to you... you are much better-off... if you focus on His grace shown to you. ... God is infinitely generous and gracious... and will **always** give us **better** than we deserve. We observed this in the Parable of the Field Workers.

We also saw... in this same parable... a different smudge that needs to be wiped off our reading glasses. (This one is important to passage today)... and it was: **those who presume higher status for themselves**... (on grounds of their longevity of service... or the notoriety of their lives)... **will**

by that very assumption... be **last**... rather than **first**. (The first shall be last and the last shall be first.) ... We must be careful to have the right attitude in serving the Lord. ... We must keep in mind that **Those who presume higher status for themselves**... (on grounds of their longevity of service... or the notoriety of their lives)... **will by that very assumption**... be **last**... rather than **first**.

There is a wonderful unconsciousness of true spirituality. Genuinely holy people are preoccupied with **God**... rather than **themselves**... and in fact are generally **less** conscious of themselves. ... (May that principle challenge us all!) ... Let's now pick up our passage with verse 17...

Matthew 20:17-19

In this context (“the first will be last, and the last first”)... of those who are with low status being exalted... Jesus is the extreme example. ...He is about to voluntarily submit to ridicule and execution... as a common criminal... at the hands of the Romans. ... He is about to be made excessively **low**... but then to be vindicated by God in the resurrection.

This was not the first time Jesus told His disciples about this treatment. He is repeating His earlier forewarnings... reminding His disciples of the reason for this final journey to Jerusalem. (He did this also in Matthew 16:21... and 17:22-23). ... In His earlier proclamations... Jesus simply said that He would be betrayed into the hands of men. ... Now... He provided greater detail to that dreadful foretelling. ... He would be betrayed to the Jewish leadership. ... They... in turn... would hand Him over to the Gentiles... who would humiliate Him and then crucify Him.

The disgrace would be unrelenting... the agony unthinkable... and the outcome unavoidable. ... But just as He did on the previous occasions... Jesus also told them that He would be brought back to life on the third day.

Our Lord could dn't spell it out any plainer than that. This is (actually) the fourth time He is telling them – only now in detail – exactly what is going to happen to Him. ... (FOUR times He told them... and now in great detail!)... But even though Jesus could not have been any clearer... somehow or other... the disciples did dn't comprehend it.

The reason is simply. It is the same reason that happens to you and I. Here is the reason why... .. – It just didn't fit into their program. ... (You and I have terribly smudged glasses... and the disciples must have had a filter over their ears... analogous... perhaps... to wireless headphones (more intently listening to something else.) It was as though they did not even hear what Jesus was talking about ...because their minds were so focused on the music of their dreams and aspirations.)

Matthew 20:20-21

Verse 20 starts off with the preposition “then”... because Matthew wants us to notice how close this conversation was to Jesus' discussion about His cross. “Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Him...”
(Immediately after... she came up to Jesus.) ... “Yes... yes... that's nice... Jesus... Now we want to talk with You about something really important...”
This mother and her sons didn't hear a word He just said. They were too busy listening to their own music. The timing is almost comical... if it wasn't so sad!

This mother's question is (1) cowardly... (2) commendable... and (3) condemnable. ... It's **cowardly** in that it's not so much her question as her boys'. ... She's not the coward — **they** are.

Notice that when Jesus replies in verse 22... He talks around her to them. The "you" (second-person plural) in that verse is the two boys. ...

Kent Hughes puts it this way:

They're acting like bashful schoolchildren on the playground... pushing their bravest friend over to the girls. "*Go ask Susie if she'll go to the dance with me.*" They are cowering behind their mom's skirt. Does Jesus roll his eyes here? Does he think to himself, "*You're getting your mother to ask your question?*" What he did with his eyes and thought in his mind, we don't know. What we do know is that he brought these sons of thunder down to earth with His cup question. The cup question is about courage. *Do you two cowards have it?*

This question is cowardly. It is also **commendable**. It is commendable because of her posture. ... (She humbly kneels before Jesus before she asks their less-than-humble question.) It is sourced in faith concerning Christ and His kingdom. ... (THINK ABOUT IT!)... To ask this question shows that they believe in the kingdom of heaven — all that Jesus has been teaching about Himself... (His coming reign... and the community that will exist under His Lordship.) ... They don't perfectly understand the concept... as shown in their question... but they **do think** Jesus' vision will succeed.

Now... there are at least two things for us to recognize here. ... First... we should understand... that true faith and real error... can be **mixed** in the heart of the strongest believers. ... Were these two disciples (and perhaps

their mother) strong believers...? – No doubt! ... So... can a high view of Jesus... coexist with an even higher view of self? - Yes. ... Can great faith and such great ignorance be so entwined in one brain? - Yes again. ... This means that we ought to persistently pray for purity... and we ought to gently seek to purify one another. ... We ought to care enough to correct obvious impurities.

Second... as much as we shake our heads in dismay or wag our fingers at them in shame... nevertheless “we may”... as Charles Spurgeon said... “*question ourselves as to whether we think as much of our Lord as [they] did.*”

- Do we believe Jesus will in deed reign?
- Do we give merely a passing thought to the eternal kingdom?
- Do you and I hope to get a good spot in it?

We don't ask Jesus for the greatest position... but it is advisable to serve Christ – as though we are storing up treasure in Heaven.

Colossians 3:1-2 (ESV)

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

The mom's question in verse 21... is cowardly but commendable. ... But also... third... it is ultimately condemnable. ... The context of their question makes it especially condemnable. ...

Look at the flow of these events that Matthew gives us...

Matthew 19:28 (ESV)

Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when 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 of Israel.

Jesus informed His disciples that they would sit on twelve thrones in His new kingdom... but the mother of James and John wanted more. She wanted her sons to sit in the places of highest honor... one on the right hand and one on the left hand of Jesus.

After Jesus spoke of the disciple's reward... He states – not once – but twice...

Matthew 19:30 (ESV)

But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Matthew 20:16 (ESV)

So the last will be first, and the first last."

James... John... and their mother did not hear it... because it did not fit their interests. With their headphones still covering their ears... Jesus spoke in detail about His brutal death in Jerusalem. ... And (right after)... came this "ambition question." Jesus will be lifted up on a tree... and these boys want to be lifted up to thrones number two and three. Jesus spoke about a cross... but they were only interested in a crown. ... They wanted reserved seats on special thrones!

True faith and real error... can be mixed in the heart of the strongest believers. Don't be satisfied with this! Seeing it here... shows how ludicrous it is! ... PRAY for your own... and other's purity!

Surprisingly... Jesus is gentle with this mother and her sons...

Matthew 20:22

In their arrogance... as well as their ignorance... they believed that they could handle whatever lay ahead. ... But they were not anticipating such suffering. ... They could only visualize themselves sitting in the position of highest honor in Jesus' kingdom.

Their answer to Jesus' question was sincere... though brash... since they did not know what they were talking about. ... Similarly... we will see them in Matthew 26:35...promise Jesus at the Last Supper... that they would not desert Him in His sufferings. And yet... they did!

Matthew 20:23

I doubt that I have to tell you how radically countercultural Jesus' teaching was then... as it is now. ... Throughout our passage this morning... (and last week)... we have been focusing on Christ's challenges to our assumptions and priorities. ... And here we find another.

Our culture "ceaselessly" directs us up, up, up. Upward mobility is the call of American society. ... But we must "pray almost daily... for the wisdom and courage"... to go down, down, down. ... And we go down, down, down because Jesus went down, down, down. ... He descended into greatness.

When Jesus tells James and John... "*You will drink my cup*," He is telling them that they too will lose their lives serving others. ... To be sure... these disciples didn't experience the cup of suffering that Jesus experienced on

the cross in an atoning sense... but their lives would be lived in sacrificial service to others... based on what Jesus had done. ... James was beheaded (Acts 12:2)... and John was exiled as a prisoner on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). ... This kind of sacrificial service is what defines kingdom greatness.

There was a cross BEFORE a crown for Jesus... and there is to be a cross before a crown for every follower of Jesus. ... But so much of our prayer-life reveals that we operate from a different assumption than this. ... We pray so diligently for God to spare us... and to rescue us... from anything unpleasant. *“Remove this burden!” “Deliver me from this trial – NOW!”* ... But knowing that there must be a cross before a crown – our primary prayer... whenever we face hardship **should** be: *“Lord, guide me through this... Walk with me... and let me emerge from this – a better servant for Your Kingdom...”* ... You might even want to pray: *“Just as **You** did... Lord, help me descend into greatness...”*

I would like to give you J Vernon McGee’s comments on Matthew 20:23...

Our Lord is not saying that there is no place at His right hand and left hand for somebody. He is saying that He will not arbitrarily give the positions to James and John or to anyone else. Rather, the places are for those who prepare themselves for them.

Note this very carefully: Heaven is for the asking. You do nothing, nothing, for salvation. You are saved by faith in Christ through His marvelous grace. However, my friend, your position, your reward in heaven is determined by what you do down here on earth. That is very important, and Christians seem to have lost sight of it. What kind of a place are you preparing for yourself? Personally, I have no ambition for the places on Christ's right or left hand -- I'm sure I have missed those -- but I am working for a place. All of us should be doing

this. In Philippians 3:14 Paul said, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." The trouble with Christians today is that too few are even trying to win anything. We need to recognize salvation as a free gift, but we need to get on the race course in order to receive a reward.

Matthew 20:24-27

Could it be any clearer...? ... We must descend into greatness!

The result of James and John and their mother's request... was "indignation"... on the part of the other disciples — probably because **they** had not thought of it **first!**

However... this disagreement between all the disciples gave Jesus the opportunity to teach a practical lesson on leadership. In His kingdom... we must not follow the examples of the world.

Rome ruled many nations... first conquering them by military might... then setting up a political hierarchy... through which Rome could extract the taxes needed to support the empire. ... Rome's rule was absolute... and its authority unquestioned. ... However... it did not rule over many nations from one central location. ... Officials were appointed over the various nations... and the full authority of Rome had been given to **these** leaders... to rule over those who were placed under them.

Unlike this system of Rome's worldly rulers... (who lorded their authority over people)... Jesus' disciples were to manifest a **different** kind of leadership. ... Like their Master... they were to live **selflessly** for the good of others. ... God's glory... and not their own reputation... was to be their goal. ... The disciples were to love people by **serving** them.

We must descend into greatness!

Matthew 20:28

Jesus is our servant... but in order to understand what Jesus means here... we need to make sure we understand what Jesus does not mean. This does **not** mean that we tell Jesus what to do. (He's not our servant in that way.) ... We must never approach Jesus... as if He is there to do all our bidding.

This text **does** mean that Jesus gives us what we need. ... This point is absolutely key to understanding Christianity. ... Jesus had just told James and John that they were going to suffer... and that following Him would involve the radical sacrifice of their lives... in service to others. ... But this radical call to service from Jesus... was accompanied by a radical promise from Jesus. ... To renounce the ways of this world and to give their lives as slaves in this world was not possible... (humanly speaking)... but Jesus would empower James and John... by His service to them.

The one overarching point in this section of Matthew's Gospel surfaces once again here. - Salvation is all of divine mercy... and not by human merit.

That we are utterly and completely dependent on God's mercy... is not only true at the point of conversion. ... Even after we're saved... we are dependent on divine mercy... in every part of our lives. ... Jesus promises to give us what we need on a daily... moment-by-moment basis. ... When He leads His children into difficult places... or calls us to do difficult things... He enables us to do these things because He is our servant.

(LISTEN!)... Every time Jesus calls us to do something... it is His way of telling us how He wants to serve us. ... When He calls us to give up everything we have... for example... or when He calls spouses to love each other - even when times are tough... in all these situations... Jesus aims to serve us and sustain us. ... Everything Jesus commands us to do... is a call to trust Him in serving us.

We are being served at every moment... and as we realize this... we exalt Jesus... **by serving others.**

... ..

Matthew chapter 20 finishes with yet another example of Jesus serving others. It also exemplifies the last being first.

Matthew 20:29-34

Beggars were a common sight. They were an annoyance even when they kept their place and quietly asked for alms... but when they loudly called out to Christ... the multitude had no sympathy. The people tramping past the blind men bluntly told them to be quiet. But the two men knew they needed Christ and... crowd or no crowd... opposition or no opposition... they were not going to be silenced. ... They were not intimidated by the heartless throng. ... The blind men ignored their critics. Matthew wrote, "*They cried the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David.*"

How easily people are kept from Christ by fear of their particular crowd! ... Think of those who make up your crowd—your professional peers, perhaps the kids at school, the gang, the members of your club. If you lift up your

voice to express some heartfelt need to come to Christ... and if you do it in a way that makes your crowd feel ill at ease, they will try to silence you. Someone will make a cutting remark.

The two blind men were made of sterner stuff than to be silenced or kept from Christ by those in the crowd who rudely told them to "hold their peace." Their sense of need was stronger than any desire to be at peace with the multitude who blocked their way to Jesus. So "they cried the more."

Don't let the crowd determine your priorities. ... These men knew Who Jesus was. They had urgent need and they call out to Him... using His Messianic Title: "Son of David..."

Jesus stopped and asked them a question that sounds a little strange, 'What do you want me to do for you?' One might have thought that an unnecessary question... because the answer should be obvious. But it is of course a good question. It is possible to be wanting Jesus to do far less than His purpose would be.

Normally... beggars would shout at passersby... so people could see their pitiable condition... and be persuaded to give them some small change... helping them to survive for another day. ... However... responding to Jesus' question... they asked the **unthinkable**. ... They asked for their eyesight to be restored. ... They didn't want some small consolation from a pitying observer.

Here Jesus put into practice what He had just taught the disciples. He became a **servant** to two rejected blind beggars. The crowds around Jesus

tried to silence the two men. After all... what claim did they have on the great Teacher?... But Jesus had compassion on them and healed them. He was the servant even of beggars.

These men seemed to understand that Jesus was God's Messiah. They hailed Him as Lord and as the Son of David. Knowing Him to be the Messiah... He was the resource Who could provide relief.

For those in need of Jesus' help (which is all of us), the application of this story is simple: **boldly confess your need for His mercy**. Throw aside your pride and say... maybe for the first time in your life... "*Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.*" ... That was the cry of these blind men... for they knew that they could not open their own eyes. ... They were fully dependent on Jesus' power and kindness. ... Even if you're already a Christian... the same truth applies: Daily confess your need for Christ's mercy. Trust Him to serve you.

With truth-based faith... ask God for the unthinkable. ... Ask that He would change your assumptions and priorities. ... Both last week and this... we have discovered seven common assumptions that are not Biblical. ... Has God laid on your heart the need to start operating from different assumptions and priorities...? ... Here are seven replacement assumptions... from Matthew chapter 20.

1) God always gives us better than we deserve! Don't grumble.

2) Those who presume higher status for themselves... (on grounds of their longevity of service... or the notoriety of their lives)... will by that very assumption... be last... rather than first.

- 3) True faith and real error... can be *mixed* in the heart of the strongest believers. We must continually and diligently pray for purity.
- 4) We must descend into greatness.
- 5) There must be a cross before a crown.
- 6) Every time Jesus calls us to do something... it is His way of telling us how He wants to serve us.
- 7) Don't allow the crowd to set your priorities – ask God for the unthinkable!

According to the National Geographic website (their kids' version that is) the Pufferfish can inflate into a ball shape to evade predators. Also known as blowfish, these clumsy swimmers fill their elastic stomachs with huge amounts of water (and sometimes air) and blow themselves up to several times their normal size ... But these blow-up fish aren't just cute. Most pufferfish contain a toxic substance that makes them foul tasting and potentially deadly to other fish. The toxin is deadly to humans—1,200 times more deadly than cyanide. There is enough poison in one pufferfish to kill 30 adult humans, and there is no known antidote.

Like Pufferfish, human beings can blow themselves up with pride and arrogance to make themselves look bigger than they are. And this pride can become toxic to a marriage, a church, or a friendship. No wonder the late Bible scholar John Stott once said, "*Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend.*"