

**Exegetical Notes, Matthew 20:20-28**  
**“A Special Favor”**

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**Matthew 20:20-28**

**Verse 20**

*Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.*

- Mrs. Zebedee and her two sons, James and John, came to Jesus to ask a favor of him.
- James and John are two of Jesus’ disciples.
- Mrs. Zebedee’s approach to Jesus shows her respect for him.

**Verse 21**

*“What is it you want? he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”*

- Jesus does not agree to grant the request but only to hear what it is.
- The request is that James and John be granted places of honor in the kingdom of heaven. To be seated at the right and left of the king indicates that those occupying these places have prestige and power.
- Apparently, Mrs. Zebedee is asking that her sons be granted special places above those of the other disciples.

**Verse 22**

*“You do not know what you are asking.” Jesus said to them, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.*

- Jesus speaks to James and John, not to their mother. Apparently, Jesus understands that she made this request on their behalf and with their compliance.
- Remember that this request was made while Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, for the last time (see Matthew 20:17). Jesus had already revealed to the disciples that he was going to

Jerusalem to suffer, die and be raised to life (see Matthew 20:18-19). The question he asks, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink,” refers to the ordeal he will endure there. He is asking James and John if they can endure what he is about to endure in Jerusalem.

- It is highly unlikely that James and John understood the nature of Jesus’ question. However, to secure places of honor they are willing to do anything and are confident that they can endure what is necessary to achieve what they desire. The reward is considered more valuable than whatever it might take to earn it.

### **Verse 23**

***Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”***

- Jesus, who knows all things, knows what will happen to James and John. According to Acts 12:1-2, James was arrested by King Herod and executed. He was the first disciple to be martyred. John was exiled to the island of Patmos, a Roman penal colony, for his work as a Christian missionary/evangelist.
- Jesus acknowledges that His Father has established the order of the kingdom. It is not his right to rearrange what God has ordained. He must submit to the will of the Father, as must we.
- Therefore, he refuses the request made by Mrs. Zebedee on behalf of her sons.

### **Verse 24**

***When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.***

- The ten are the other disciples.
- We are not sure how they heard about this episode. Apparently, one of the ten heard what happened and reported it to the others.
- Their reaction is described as indignation. They cannot believe that James and John made this request. They understand that the request was made at their expense. They are angry because James and John wanted higher positions than the others would have in the kingdom. And they let James and John know how they felt.

### **Verse 25**

***Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.”***

- Jesus simply acknowledges what we know to be true in the world. People who have power and prestige often use these things to their advantage, often ruthlessly exploiting those who are less powerful.

### **Verse 26-28**

***Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

- Jesus has already taught this principle. The first shall be last and the last shall be first (see Matthew 19:30 and 20:16) However, it is so counter-cultural that the disciples have not yet gotten the point.
- Jesus’ disciples are not to act like the world. They are to follow the example that he himself will set and demonstrate at the conclusion of this trip to Jerusalem. He, the Son of God, will lay down his life for the worst of sinners.

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