

Living In The Shadow Of The Cross.

Text: Matt 20:17-28

Suggested Hymns:

376, 354, 381, 371, 59

1) As To Our Prayers

2) As To Our Ambitions

3) As To Our Service

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 20:17–28, ¹⁷ *Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ¹⁸ “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”*

²⁰ *Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”*

²² *But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.”*

²³ *So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”*

²⁴ *And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them.*

²⁶ *Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. It was to be His last pilgrimage. In the party were His disciples, among them the women who ministered to Him. On the way He took the twelve disciples aside and said, ¹⁸ ***“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”***

At the end of our text Jesus explains the purpose of His journey to Jerusalem, ***the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to ... give His life a ransom for many.***

Jesus has taken us aside again today on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem. While on that journey, we do well to keep Calvary in mind, and in the shadow of the Cross to examine our conduct. Our theme is *Living in the Shadow of the Cross*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Living In The Shadow Of The Cross

As To Our Prayers

No sooner had Jesus told the group around Him that He was on His way to the Cross than a mother with her two sons came and prayed that Jesus might grant her a special favour. We read, ²⁰ ***Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.*** We have not only the privilege, but God’s command to pray.

The Power of Prayer

Our prayers open the heart and the hand of Divine Omnipotence. There is a superhuman, a divine power put into action by our prayers. When the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel, Samuel, their Prophet and judge ***“cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. ... the LORD thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. ¹¹ And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back.”¹***

When the priests of Baal and callous Israel were gathered on Mount Carmel for a showdown as to who was the true and living God, the prophet Elijah cried to the Lord God. *“Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!”²*

Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, ruler of a world empire, marched his armies to subdue Jerusalem. *“Hezekiah, the pious king, went up into the house of the Lord and pleaded, Now therefore, O LORD our God, I pray, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the LORD God, You alone.”³*

“And it came to pass on a certain night that the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses — all dead.”⁴

God answers prayer. We have God’s command, *“ask,” “seek,” “Knock.”⁵* *“Pray without ceasing.”⁶* We also have the promise that God will hear us.

Unanswered Prayers

Yet in our text we have an example of an unanswered prayer. *²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”*

Why wasn’t her petition granted? Why do some of our prayers go unanswered? There might be several reasons. Certainly, only the one true and living God hears and answers prayer.

A prayer addressed to a totem pole, to the Virgin Mary, to the saints, or to any god, not the Triune God is idolatry. The prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel cried from morning till evening, *“O Baal, hear us!” But there was no voice; no one answered.”⁷*

At times Christians complain that their prayers are in vain. It might be that they tie God’s hands by a besetting sin. This was the trouble with the chosen

people in the Old Testament when they drifted away from the piety of their fathers.

Isaiah told them, *Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. ²But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.*"⁸

If we feel that our prayers do not help, we had better look into our heart, watch our tongue, and examine our hands.

Our text, however, does not indicate that the mother of James and John was guilty of a besetting sin.

The prayer which the mother of Zebedee's Children offered was not granted because it was an unwise and foolish prayer. She and her travelling companions were with Jesus on His way to Golgotha.

She dreams of a temporal kingdom Jesus will soon establish. She imagines that Jesus will sit, on a material throne in royal robes, with a golden crown on His head and an ivory sceptre in His hand. She envisions her two sons, unqualified as they are, sitting, one on the right hand and the other on the left, in the Messiah's kingdom.

Jesus exposed the folly of her request as a reason why this prayer could not be granted, ²² *But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able."*

²³ *So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."*

Learn From Jesus How To Pray

Our prayers must always be offered in the shadow of the Cross. There we shall learn how Jesus Himself prayed. He submitted His will to the will of His Father.⁹ While He sacrificed Himself on that altar for the sins of mankind, He prayed, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."*¹⁰

As penitent sinners we must base our prayers on the merit of Christ. Only through Christ and His redemption have we an approach to God. Scripture says

in 1 John 2:1, *¹ My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.* Such prayers offered according to God's will in Jesus' name bring the bounties of heaven upon us and upon those for whom we pray.

2. Living In The Shadow Of The Cross

As To Our Ambitions

There is another lesson we are to learn. In that party on the way with Jesus to Jerusalem a human ambition suddenly flared up. The wife of Zebedee had a lofty ambition for her two sons. Zebedee was a lowly fisherman by occupation. The sons were in business with their father. The mother had delusions of a glorious kingdom like that over which King David ruled. Her mother's heart at once saw her two fisherman sons become the prime ministers of the realm.

Noble Aspirations

Certainly, it is perfectly proper for mothers and also for fathers to entertain future lofty achievements on the part of their children. It is well for young people to be imbued with an uplifting desire not to be a liability, but an asset to their nation, community, family, and church. My young friends, may God kindle in your hearts praiseworthy aspirations and ennobling ambitions for useful knowledge, excellence, strength of character, righteousness and holiness.

Dangerous Ambitions

But we must be on our guard constantly against every inordinate ambition. The mother in the text prodded her children on to seek position and honour which they had not earned nor deserved. Men and women goaded by pride and greed, grasp for and gloat over their wealth and power.

Isaiah writes of such an inordinate ambition, in Isaiah 14:12-15, ¹² ***"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations!"*** ¹³ ***For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the furthest sides of the north;'*** ¹⁴ ***I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'*** ¹⁵ ***Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, To the lowest depths of the Pit.***

The people after the flood brought disaster upon themselves when they said, *“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”*¹¹

Abalom was a pampered young man, a show-off. He prepared for himself chariots and horses and fifty men to run before him.¹² By deceit and slander he sought his father’s, King David’s, throne. Such ambitions don’t pay off.

Consider some of the greatest rulers, perhaps, that ever sat upon a throne. Caesar, having conquered eight hundred cities and dyed his garments with the blood of one million of his foes, was stabbed by his best friends in the very place which had been the scene of his greatest triumph.

Napoleon, after being the scourge of Europe and the desolator of his country, died in banishment, conquered and a captive.

Cineas, when dissuading Pyrrhus from undertaking a war against the Romans, said, *“Sir, when you have conquered them, what will you do next?”* “Then Sicily is near at hand and easy to master.”

— *“And what when you have conquered Sicily?”* “Then we will pass over to Africa and take Carthage, which cannot long withstand us.”

— *“When these are conquered, what will be your next attempt?”* “Then,” said Pyrrhus, “we will fall in upon Greece and Macedonia and recover what we have lost there.”

— *“Well, when all are subdued, what fruit do you expect from all your victories?”* “Then,” said he, “we will sit down and enjoy ourselves.”

“Sir,” replied Cineas, *“may we not do it now? Have you not already a kingdom of your own? And he who cannot enjoy himself with a kingdom cannot with the whole world.”*

Standing under the Cross, we learn of our Saviour. He refused to accept the offer the Tempter made in the wilderness when he promised Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.

In this way He carried out His tremendous work of salvation. He warns the Zebedee family, whose inordinate aspiration was causing bad blood,²⁴ *And when*

the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you.

3. Living In The Shadow Of The Cross As To Our Service

This leads us to the third directive Jesus issues in our text. We should live to serve.

The Materialistic Philosophy of Life

We are living in a materialistic age. The thinking of our age is that a man's life consists in the abundance of the things he possesses. We as a nation are money-mad. The ideal is to put in the least number of hours, and with the least effort, to get the most pay. That thought prompted the mother when she asked Jesus to place her two sons into a position of honour and wealth and power in the new kingdom.

Christ's Philosophy of Life

Jesus condemns such a philosophy of life and shows us the proper conduct in our relation to others. He impresses upon the people on their journey to Jerusalem and upon us not to think and act as the Gentiles, the children of this world, do.

We read, *²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

The great heroes of the Old and New Testaments and the men and women of history who really served God and man and brought blessings to their church and country were determined not to be ministered to, but to minister, to serve.

As a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus told His parents and the doctors in the Temple, *I must be about My Father's business.*¹³ His whole life, wherever He went, Jesus served the people that came to Him.

Yes, He came to this sin-stained and sin-cursed earth for the one supreme purpose, to serve by laying down His life as a ransom for all mankind. This conduct of our Saviour must be the pattern for us to follow.

The love of Christ must compel us not to be ministered to, but to minister and to serve our fellow men. We must be willing even to go the second mile. In our occupation, at our jobs, among our neighbours, in our church, we must labour with the one thought in mind, “*I live to serve.*”

We must never permit ourselves to get away from Golgotha. If we live constantly under the shadow of the Cross we will pray properly and without ceasing! Ours will be Christ-like prayers which God loves to answer.

Our ambitions will be purified, ennobled, and sanctified. Our life will be enriched by an unselfish service to God and our neighbours.

May God grant that we may say with St. Paul, in Galatians 2:20, ²⁰ ***I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 Samuel 7:9–11

² 1 Kings 18:38–39

³ 2 Kings 19:19

⁴ 2 Kings 19:35

⁵ Matthew 7:7

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

⁷ 1 Kings 18:26

⁸ Isaiah 59:1–2

⁹ Luke 22:42

¹⁰ Luke 23:34

¹¹ Genesis 11:4

¹² 2 Sam 15:1

¹³ Luke 2:49