

Moving On: What Do We Do Now?

Supplemental Materials

For the final chapter of the textbook the following two exercises give examples of two processes. Here, as elsewhere throughout these supplemental materials, the important point is not to suggest that the examples represent the best way to approach a problem, and certainly not the only way. I happen to think they are quite good ways of doing so, but in the end individual exegetes must learn to do their own work—though always within the larger community of Christ’s body—in order to derive the greatest satisfaction from it. Satisfaction with our work, including enjoyment of it, provides a good portion of the enthusiasm that makes teaching Scripture effective in the community.

Section one deals with the question of discerning *a broader biblical-theological context* for an idea. Each New Testament document approaches its subject matter with its own set of questions, questions arising from the particular historical circumstance that its author wants to address. For this reason, a discussion in Romans 6 may appeal to baptism as part of its argument, but this fact does not justify us in regarding Romans 6 as a full-scale exposition of the “doctrine” of baptism. Baptism is secondary to the point in Romans 6. That text is not *about* baptism; it *uses* the idea of baptism to argue about something else. If our concern is to understand the biblical “doctrine” of baptism, then we need ways to develop a more fully orbited look at how Scripture presents it.

The example in section one traces various scriptural treatments of what we call “conscience” and analyzes it in a way similar to the way the textbook deals with the idea of “antichrist.” See if the *method* makes sense to you. Feel free to tweak the method as seems good to you. Then select another topic, say “Adam-and-Christ,” or “foolishness,” and see what you can make of it yourself. It is enlightening to read a dictionary article on such a topic; it is *electrifying* to study the material yourself and to draw your own conclusions, which you would then—of course—compare with the conclusions drawn by some of your “colleagues” through the ages.

Section two takes a Gospel text (Mt 20:17-28, the story of the Zebedee family’s request for places of honor in the Messianic kingdom) and analyzes it as one might do in preparation for Sunday’s sermon. Not everyone will have enough time every week to do even this much analysis, but the example should give a good idea of the stages that can lead to a well-rounded, biblically based exposition of the significance of a text.

By “significance,” of course, we mean “significance to Matthew”; we want to understand what Matthew (the author) apparently intended to say to his first readers. This is in many ways an idealist’s goal, never something we can be sure of having nailed. Still, it remains a legitimate goal; it serves as a compass to guide us through what otherwise disintegrates into a pathless ramble in a “what-it-means-to-me,” reader-response hermeneutic. See if you think the sermon offered at the end fits the analysis.

I. Broader Biblical-Theological Context: Conscience

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23—11:1 carefully for what it teaches about the human conscience.

Using your NA²⁷ margin, concordances, New Testament theologies, and dictionary articles, find at least two, if not three, other New Testament passages that have *significant* teaching about the conscience, and compare what you learn in those other passages with what 1 Corinthians 10:23--11:1 teaches.

Here is an example of such a study.

New Testament *concentrations* of the word *conscience* in English and the word *συνείδησις* in Greek are quickly revealed with an electronic concordance search. A few scattered references to “conscience” occur in the Old Testament, but in nowhere near the concentrations found in the New Testament, as a concordance will demonstrate for both the LXX and Greek New Testament and for the NRSV and NASB.

1 Corinthians 10:23--11:1

- vv. 25, 27: My conscience can be the ground of unnecessary scruples over otherwise “lawful” things.
- vv. 28-29: Another person’s conscience, if “unenlightened,” is authoritative for him or her, and we are obliged out of consideration for that other person not to flaunt our more “enlightened” freedom.
- vv. 29-30: Still, that other person’s conscience, of itself, has no authority over me.
- v. 24: Guiding principle for dealing with the dilemmas this tension presents.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

- v. 7: One’s conscience, uninformed by what is in fact true (vv. 1-6), is “weak,” open to being defiled by behavior that transgresses what one *thinks* is wrong.
- vv. 9-11: Those who are enlightened as to what is in fact true can by the indiscrete use of that freedom cause a “weak” believer to transgress his or her conscience through imitating the behavior of the “stronger” believer.
- v. 12: This amounts to the stronger believer’s “wounding” the weaker believer’s conscience, and that wounding amounts to a sin against Christ himself.

1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2-4

- References to good conscience, clear conscience, rejected/seared conscience.

Hebrews 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:18

- 9:9, 14: The conscience is something one might hope (in vain) to “perfect” through gifts and sacrifices, but that rather is “purified” from dead works by the offering of Christ’s own blood. Thus, here does “conscience” refer to a sense of guilt?
- 10:2, 22: Similarly, Christ’s work frees us, perfects us, and purifies us from a [guilty] conscience, from an evil conscience.

- 13:18: Again, the “clean” conscience is a conscience free from the consciousness of sin.

1 Corinthians 4:1-4 (using the verb συνόιδα “be conscious of” rather than the noun συνείδησις)

- Paul, though in possession of a clear conscience (v. 4: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔμαυτῶ συνόιδα “I am conscious of nothing against me”), does not therefore consider himself cleared before God. God alone is the final judge, not Paul’s conscience, and certainly not anyone else’s conscience either.

Concordances will not, unfortunately, pick up other relevant texts that do not use this same terminology. The NA²⁷ marginal notes at both 1 Corinthians 10 and 8, however, point immediately to the highly relevant text in Romans 14.

Romans 14:1-23 speaks of “faith” where 1 Corinthians 10 speaks of “conscience.”

- The “weak in faith” have scruples about what can be eaten and which days are more important than others; they have these scruples precisely because they are weak in faith. Yet God accepts their weak faith and their scruples as honoring him.
- Implied in this is the fact that the “strong in faith” have no such scruples, honoring God instead by their conviction that he has made all food and all days equally holy.
- Weak and strong alike, therefore, must recognize God’s acceptance of the other; they must refrain from passing judgment where God does not.
- On the other hand, the “strong” must not exercise their “strong” faith in a way that encourages the “weak” to stumble. Nothing is unclean of itself, but it *is* unclean indeed to the person who *thinks* it is unclean (v. 14)! It is wrong of us to make such persons transgress their sense of clean and unclean by flaunting our “superior” knowledge.
- Thus verse 22 exhorts believers to have their faith in private before God; their doubts are *authoritative for them*.

From this survey of the data produced from concordance searches and from the marginal notes in NA²⁷, we can see how biblical writers (esp. Paul) view conscience, or “faith.” It looks as if they view conscience as our capacity to distinguish between what we believe to be good and what we believe to be evil. Whether we believe rightly or wrongly about it is a separate question. While conscience, or “faith” (conviction?), can be misinformed and re-informed, transgressing it, *even when it is “wrong,”* leads to destruction. Conscience functions as our sensitivity toward God’s will.

There is much more we could do at this point in order to gain a larger “biblical” view of the subject. For example, we could consult relevant sections of New Testament (or Old Testament) theologies, or check articles on “conscience” in biblical dictionaries. However, by performing in advance such simple surveys as this, we put ourselves in a much better position to evaluate the adequacy of those other treatments.

II. Application and Proclamation: Matthew 20:17-28

The exegetical analysis presented here uses the scheme devised by R. W. Tate (*Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991]), in which he distinguishes three “worlds”: (a) the world *behind* the text, or the text’s original historical-cultural setting; (b) the world *within* the text, or the text’s character as literary piece; and (c) the world *in front of* the text, or the world in which a particular interpreter of the text lives.

Text and Translation

Textual Criticism: Exegetically significant variants († means “previously preferred text”). The following alternative readings, if they were to be adopted, would make some exegetical difference, however slight, in the meaning of the text.

v. 17

- †μέλλων δὲ ἀναβαίνειν Ἰησοῦς (“As Jesus was about to go up . . .”)
- ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ καὶ (Did Jesus take his disciples aside in the road and speak to them, or did he take them aside and speak to them in the road?)

vv. 22-23

- addition from Mark 10:38-39 of the baptism metaphor for Jesus’ death

v. 26

- †ἔστιν (present tense, “is,” as opposed to future “will be”)

v. 28

- addition in D of the “floating tradition” based on Luke 14:8-10 (on taking the lower place at a banquet). Interesting from the perspective of the sort of free-lance traditions “floating” around in the early church

Grammatical problems

v. 19

- Why is ἐγερθήσεται not an infinitive like the three that precede it? [If it were, it would imply the same subjects: the Gentiles would be “raised up” on the third day.]

v. 23

- What’s going on, grammatically, at the end of this verse, where it reads ἀλλ’ οἷς ἠτοιμάσται ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου? [Note the *ellipsis* between the first two words of something like δοθήσεται, “it will be given.”]

Discerning the World Behind the Text (The Historical-Cultural Background)

A. In Jesus' situation

1. *Crucifixion as a form of punishment.* Borrowed from eastern cultures by Rome and used for execution of non-Romans. Intended to provoke public mockery and shame. Torturous, slow death. Implied, to Jewish thinking, the curse of God (Deut 21:22-23) and disqualified Jesus from Messianic status.

2. *Identity of the mother of the sons of Zebedee.* Note Mark 15:40 and Matthew's treatment of it in Matthew 27:56: suggests that Matthew knew that Zebedee's wife's name was Salome. Is this the same person John 19:25 refers to as the sister of Jesus' mother? If so, then she is Jesus' aunt, and James and John are his cousins. This would explain their readiness to follow him (Mt 4:21-22) and their (mother's) bold request in Matthew 20:20-21. Likewise, perhaps, this explains Jesus' giving Mary his mother into the charge of his "cousin" John [?] (Jn 19:26-27). Salome is apparently there again at the foot of the cross (27:56 and parallels) and at the tomb (Mk 16:1). But much of this reconstruction is built on a series of suppositions and may not be valid.

3. *Old Testament background to the metaphor of the cup.* Frequent Old Testament use of the metaphor "cup," both for blessing (Ps 16:5; 23:5; 116:13; cf. 1 Cor 10:16) and for curse or judgment (Is 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15-16; Ezek 23:31-34; cf. Mk 14:36). The contents can be life-giving or life-destroying. Hosea 2:16 associates drinking the cup of judgment with contempt and shame, and Isaiah 51:23 associates it with scorn, themes present in the story of the crucifixion.

4. *Background to the "right hand" and the "left hand."* Right hand and left hand, in this context, probably refer to the positions assigned to the chief lieutenants in a throne room or a king's council circle. The right hand would be for the "first" lieutenant (cf. πρῶτος "first," v. 27), and the left would be for the "great" one (cf. μέγας "great," v. 26). See the vision of Micaiah the prophet, in which he sees the Lord on his throne with his hosts at his right and his left (1 Kings 22:19 [= 2 Chron 18:18]). We perhaps see this arrangement reflected even outdoors, on the road, when a disgruntled Israelite throws rocks at King David, who has his people lined up on his right hand and on his left (2 Sam 16:6).

5. *Old Testament background to Matthew 20:28.* This passage abounds in themes of service and suffering, and then it culminates in the "ransom for many" saying. All these ideas are strongly reminiscent of the Servant Songs of Isaiah, and of Isaiah 53 in particular.

B. In Matthew's situation

1. Redactional issues

(a) *Placement in comparison to Mark's arrangement.* All three of Jesus' main passion predictions occur in the second half of each of the three Synoptics. They appear in

virtually the same contexts in each, with two exceptions. (a) The second Matthean prediction (Mt 17:22-23) is followed by the pericope on payment of temple tax (17:24-27), which does not appear in the other two Gospels. (b) The third Matthean prediction (20:17-19) is *preceded* by the parable of the vineyard workers (20:1-16), which, again, does not occur in either of the other two Gospels.

The larger sequence of Matthew's context for this third prediction includes the pericope of the rich young man and Jesus' teaching on the subject of riches and the kingdom (19:16-26).

This is followed by Peter's wanting to know what he and the others will get as a result of their leaving everything to follow Jesus, contrary to what the rich young man has done (19:27-30).

To illustrate his response, Jesus tells the story of the laborers in the vineyard (20:1-16), culminating in a first-shall-be-last saying, matching one at 19:30 (cf. 20:8). Then, en route to Jerusalem, Jesus foretells his passion once more (20:17-19).

At this point, the Zebedee family asks for special, privileged positions for James and John (20:20-23). This angers the other ten, and Jesus takes them all aside to explain leadership and servanthood in the kingdom of God (20:24-28).

Immediately following this comes the story of the two blind men in Jericho (20:29-34), who perhaps parallel the two blind Zebedee brothers.

The entire sequence centers on the themes of service, sacrifice, and status in the kingdom of God, just as it does in Mark (and Luke).

(b) Editorial touches. Compared with Mark 10:32-45, Matthew 20:17-28 displays the following significant editorial changes:

v. 17: Omits references to "them" and their "wonder and fear"; this focuses the attention solely on Jesus in his progress toward Jerusalem.

v. 19: In the details of the coming suffering, omits references to "spit on," specifies "crucifying" rather than the general "killing," and uses ἐγείρω instead of ἀνίστημι, both meaning "raise/rise up." The latter is used in Matthew only in non-resurrection senses (Mt 9:9; 12:41; 22:24; 26:62).

vv. 20-21: Introduces the mother of the Zebedee brothers and her bowing down to Jesus, though Jesus ultimately responds to the brothers themselves, as in Mark. Likewise omits the names of James and John. Note the addition of τότε "then," which emphasizes the close connection between this pericope and the preceding one (passion prediction).

v. 21: Substitutes εὐωνύμων for ἀριστερῶν “left-hand” (former more common in the New Testament [9x versus 4x] and in Matthew [5x versus 1x]). In classical Greek, the word εὐωνύμων was a euphemism for the usual word ἀριστερῶν, which had “evil omen” connotations. In the New Testament, it may be more a stylistic preference.

Substitutes βασιλεία “kingdom” for δόξα “glory” (Hagner: “more Jewish” and associated with the arrival in Jerusalem).

vv. 22-23: Omits references to “baptism,” Mark’s second metaphor for death, though he retains the metaphor of the cup.

v. 23: Adds that “his Father” has already prepared for someone else the positions the two brothers seek.

v. 24: Again omits the names of the Zebedee brothers (cf. v. 20)

v. 27: Substitutes ὑμῶν “your” for πάντων “of all” perhaps restricting the application to the church.

2. Conclusions to be drawn from these issues

Besides focusing the stories more on Jesus and heightening slightly the contrast between the teaching of Jesus and the disciples’ failure to understand it, not very much of genuine significance is evident in Matthew’s editing of Mark.

The introduction of the mother of the sons of Zebedee is remarkable, however. Hagner thinks it is intended to soften “the objectionable character of the request.” But he has just pointed out the way Matthew heightens the contrast between Jesus’ and the disciples’ attitudes (p. 578). It seems to me rather that the role of the mother casts her sons’ behavior as both outrageous and cowardly, making the request all the more objectionable. In addition to this, adding the mother to the scene is matched by Matthew’s adding reference also to [his] Father, who decides to whom the places of honor are awarded (v. 23). The contrast is apparently deliberate.

Discerning the World Within the Text (The Text as Literary Creation)

A. Placement (arrangement) within the overall scheme of Matthew (again). See above (p. 10.6, §1 [a]). Note how the “world behind” and the “world within” overlap here, because Matthew’s editorial activity gives evidence both of his own and his congregation’s historical situation, as well as of the way the book has been designed as a “narrative.”

B. Structure. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is clearly defined (Mt 20:1-16); note the way 19:30 and 20:16 match. There is a clear break at 20:16/17, though there may be significant connections between the parable and the following dialogues. After all, *Matthew* has inserted the parable into the Markan story here.

The mention of being en route to Jerusalem at 20:17, 18 returns the readers' attention to the coming crisis, as does the third passion prediction, which makes up Jesus' speech in verses 17-19. The journey is "resumed" at 20:29, and again at 21:1 (cf. 16:21; 19:1; 21:10). The text 20:17-28, then, can perhaps be considered a single "teaching" unit given along the way to Jerusalem.

Within the span of text 20:17-28, further breaks can be seen at verses 19/20 and at verses 23/24. The first is signaled by a shift in cast, the introduction of the mother of the sons of Zebedee and her request. It comes not in response to Jesus' passion prediction, but in fact in spite of it. Note the τότε at the front of verse 20, indicating that even though the mother and her sons have not really "heard" Jesus' words, except perhaps the mention of his entering Jerusalem soon (triumphantly, they hope), nonetheless, Matthew the storyteller wants us to see this absurd request as coming right on the heels of his solemn announcement. In addition, a simple chiasm holds the subparagraph 20:20-23 together:

- A Request for places at the right and the left (v. 21)
- B Are you able to drink the cup? (v. 22)
- C We are able! (v. 22)
- B' You will indeed drink the cup (v. 23)
- A' The granting of right and left places is already taken care of (v. 23)

The break at between verses 23 and 24 is further indicated by another shift in cast, as the other ten disciples react to what the two sons of Zebedee have done. Thus, there are three subparagraphs within the larger unit:

- 20:17-19 Jesus' third passion prediction
- 20:20-23 The request of the Zebedee family
- 20:24-28 The teaching about servanthood and leadership

C. The passion prediction (Mt 20:17-19). Note how much more detailed this third passion prediction is than the first (Mt 16:21) or the second (17:22-23; cf. 17:12). Instead of "suffer many things and be killed" Jesus now expects mockery, whipping and crucifixion (even Mark here has "kill"), and now specifically from the Gentiles.

The specific forms of suffering Jesus is expecting actually do come to pass in the passion narrative (mockery [ἐμπαίζω] at 27:29, 31, 41; flogging [φραγελλόω rather than μαστιγόω] by Pilate at 27:26; and of course crucifixion). So does the spitting, by both Jewish leaders (26:67) and Gentiles (27:30), though Matthew has omitted mention of it from the parallel in Mark 10:34 (20:19). These details function to point the readers ahead to the ordeal coming in chapter 27. *This makes chapter 27 part of the context of the Zebedees' request.*

D. The Zebedees' request (Mt 20:20-23). Strong contrast between the preceding and following passages (Passion prediction, healing of the blind men), is heightened (1) by the central positioning of this paragraph between them, (2) by τότε at verse 20, and (3)

by the way in which the dramatic tension is drawn out in the dialogue between Jesus and Zebedee's wife (she comes to ask for something; he says, "what do you want?" etc.), and (4) by the contrast between the mother of the Zebedees (v. 20) and the Father of Jesus (v. 23) in determining the coveted appointments. The introduction of the mother as the initiator (cf. Mk 10:35) also seems designed to sharpen the cowardice of the two sons, and thus the contrast between their values and Jesus' own; that she "softens" the offensiveness of the request (Hagner) does not fit the context as well, it seems to me.

The Zebedee proposal is perhaps to be understood as a direct challenge to the apparent favoritism granted to Peter at 16:18 ("on this rock").

E. The teaching on true greatness (Mt 20:24-28). There are strong thematic parallels between this section and the corresponding passage in 16:24-28 (and not just in the verse numbers!). (1) The Lord's response to a distorted view of kingdom values; (2) the emphasis on self-denial as the way to follow the One who gives up his own life; (3) the complete reversal of "human" values (cf. "save-life, lose-life" 16:25, and "greatness" and "servanthood" 20:26-27); (4) the theme of "exchanging" something for a life or of giving a life in exchange for many (ἀντάλλαγμα τῆ ψυχῆ 16:26; δοῦναι ψυξὴν λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν 20:28: the latter answering the former?). Note, as well, similar "values" connections with the temptation in Matthew 4:1-10.

Discerning the World in front of the Text (The Text in Our World)

A. Observations

1. The precise phrase εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν [σου] καὶ εἷς ἐξ εὐωνύων [σου] "one on [your] right hand and one on [your] left hand" occurs in Matthew *only* at 20:21/23 *and* at 27:38.
2. The Matthean "kingdom" (Mt 20:21) in place of Mark's "glory" (Mk 10:37) is perhaps anticipatory of this "coronation" theme in chapter 27.
3. Note the kingship motif in the woman's anointing of Jesus' head with expensive ointment (Mt 26:7). Jesus interprets it as preparation for his burial, however (26:12). Mark, too, has her anointing Jesus' head, but Luke and John have her anoint his feet.
4. The expression οἷς ἠτοιμάσται ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου "for whom it has been prepared by my father" in Matthew 20:23 begs explanation, just as in a novel the mention of a gun over the fireplace in chapter one requires it to be fired by chapter five. It seems almost undeniable that Matthew intended his readers to "see" who in fact it was to whom God intended those two places of honor to go.
5. The identity of the persons "for whom" in 27:38 makes the jealous scramble for positions in 20:20-23 all the more ludicrous.

B. Writing a sermon

Those for Whom It Has Been Prepared Matthew 20:20-28 Good Friday R. Erickson

In the fall of 1967, I asked Randee to marry me. We were twenty years old—mere kids; it was the beginning of a long engagement. The next summer I bought her a diamond ring. It's not a very big diamond actually; we held it up against a nearly full carat diamond recently, and it looks kind of pathetic. But at the time, buying that little rock was a sacrificial act: I had to sell my car (for which I got only \$75!), my coin collection, my stereo and records (including a full set of Beatle albums), and most painful of all, my camera.

I loved that camera. It was a 35 mm Mamiya Sekor 500 SLR, with a behind-the-lens viewfinder and a built-in “spot”-type light meter. It had both a close-up lens and a telephoto lens, as well a really nice tripod. I sold the whole lot to a guy who worked downtown at Sears, and though it was all for a good cause, I nearly cried to let it go.

That camera not only gave me a lot of satisfaction and fun, but it was also the cause of one of those triumphant moments that occasionally make life worth living. I originally bought the thing because I'd signed up for a photography course at college, or maybe I signed up for the course because I wanted to buy the camera. I don't remember. In any case, once I was in the course, I devoted myself to taking cool pictures of caterpillars, hubcaps, and eyelashes, and to learning to develop and print them on my own in the school darkroom.

There was a guy in the class named Barry, already a Viet Nam vet, older than most of the rest of us, an African-American, tall and willowy as a Watusi. We were in awe of him. He owned an expensive Nikon with dual lenses and took stunningly textured shots of driftwood, tree bark and virgin rock. Barry was the silent, taciturn type, kind of like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. He didn't say much, but when he did, it was about photography, and we hung on his every word, turning each one over and over in our minds to milk it for every last drop of filmy wisdom.

Also in the class was a guy named Jim who had graduated with me from high school. He was what is now called a nerd, just like me, but a nerd with an attitude. I was a nerd and accepted it; Jim was a nerd and fought it. He strove with all his might to be cool, and acted as if he thought he had succeeded. He, too, had an expensive camera, a classy little Pentax. I don't remember why, but he resented me. I'm pretty sure I had never intentionally crossed him, and it may just have been that I somehow reminded him that he and I were both social losers.

One morning, as ten or a dozen of us were standing around shooting the breeze before class—including Barry, tall, dark, and silent—Jim spoke up loud and clear, obviously

wanting to impress Barry with his superior taste in cameras. He sneered at me and snarled, pointing at my camera, “What the blankety-blank made you sink money into a piece of blankety-blank like that Mamiya?” It was in very poor taste, a calculated insult from one who thought he was worthy, but I was crushed, speechless in my dismay. Embarrassment engulfed the whole group; everyone broke eye contact and twiddled with their thumbs. After a moment, Barry looked straight at Jim. “That Mamiya will run circles around your Pentax,” he said, and he turned and walked away.

The Sons of Zebedee and Their Mother Superior

Which brings us to the story of the sons of Zebedee and their Mother Superior. It’s not hard to imagine the scene. There have been pushy mothers for millennia. Rebekah was one of them, tricking her poor old blind husband Isaac into giving the family blessing to her favorite son, Jacob; she did this by dressing Jacob up to smell and feel like his hairy brother, Esau, who was Isaac’s favorite. Most mothers want their kids to do well in life, to get ahead, to find security, honor and happiness. It’s a natural thing. It’s just that some mothers get carried away.

That’s what happens to Mrs. Zebedee in this story. She wants Jesus to make sure her two boys have the second and third positions in the new regime that she expects Jesus is about to establish. Think of it! James and John, her very own sons, rising from mere Galilean fishermen to first and second vice presidents of the Messiah’s worldwide kingdom. She remembers how they showed such promise as toddlers, both with APGAR scores off the charts at birth, both of them early talkers, easy walkers. It is as obvious to her as the noses on their faces: they are clearly—far and away—the top contenders for the right-hand and left-hand spots beside the Messianic King.

The boys may have hung back shyly as Mom made the pitch. Mark’s Gospel simplifies the story slightly by leaving Mom entirely out of it; there, in Mark 10, cheeky John and James, the “sons of thunder,” come to Jesus on their own. But even in Matthew’s version, they do speak up. Jesus, a little amazed at the woman’s request, turns to the two behind her and asks them—not her, “Do you have any idea what you’re asking? Are you ready to endure with me everything I must endure as part of this privilege?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. We’re ready to drink from that cup. No problem.”

This must not have been what Jesus was expecting them to reply, for he kind of back-peddles here. It’s as if he were at first implying that if the sons of Zebedee indeed were willing to drink from the same cup of suffering which Jesus would drink from, then they would actually be granted their request. But since he had already more than once been open and free about the cruel way he himself would soon die, he perhaps expected these men to balk at suffering in that way. When they said “no problem,” Jesus had to tell them that even if they *were* ready to share with him his coming fate, he couldn’t help them with their outrageous request. Those places of authority were not for him to give away; the Father in heaven had already determined who would occupy those seats to the right

and left of Jesus' Messianic throne. The privilege of sitting on those thrones, he says, "is reserved for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

How embarrassing to be rebuffed like that, even if by a kindly master. How humiliating to have your audacious request turned down flat. How mortifying, having sat down boldly in the best seats, to hear the host kindly but firmly ask you to give up those seats for guests more honored than you! How like what happened to old Jim back at my college photography class, to be sharply rebuked in public by the very person you assumed you were impressing, and then to see that person elevate *above* you precisely the one you had hoped to humiliate. It reminds me of the night wicked old Haman was invited to have dinner with Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus, but we won't go there now. Some other time. There is instead a more interesting question here: Just who *were* those persons for whom the Father had prepared the thrones on either side of his kingly Son? Do we know? We do indeed! Matthew tells us in his own peculiar way.

The King's Coronation Day

The ambitious Mrs. Zebedee wanted her sons to be installed in their rightful positions of authority when Jesus established his kingdom, that is, once he was made king. But since the decision was not up to him, Jesus turned her down—or at least made her no promises, though he did not deny that he would be made king some day. That much he and she agreed on. He also implicitly agreed that there would indeed be persons appointed to be his first and second lieutenants.

Well then, when does Jesus get crowned king of the new realm? When does he actually become king? We might answer, at the second coming, or at the resurrection, or when he arrives as the Lamb, the Lion of Judah, in the heavenly throne room pictured in Revelation 5. But Matthew has his own way of describing King Jesus' coronation day, and it's full of profound irony. Matthew loves irony. In the trial scene, he reports that when Pontius Pilate washed his hands of the injustice of Jesus' condemnation and told the crowds that it was their problem, they replied, "Fine! Let his blood be upon us and our children!" Of course, what they meant was that they willingly took responsibility for Jesus' death; but Matthew wants us to see that they, too, would be "covered" by the blood of Jesus, and that they were praying for their own redemption without knowing it. That's irony.

In that same chapter, chapter 27, Matthew also tells of the shameful aftermath of Jesus' trial. Once condemned, he is led away by soldiers to be crucified, but not before they've had a little fun. They strip off his garments and deck him out with a royal scarlet robe. They weave thorny vines together to form a crown, which they jam down on his head. They give him a stalk of grass for his royal scepter and bow down before him, mockingly hailing him as the King of the Jews. And finally they nail a placard over his head as he hangs on the cross: "This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." They joke and horselaugh as they do this. To them it is all foolishness, an opportunity to outdo each other in witty buffoonery. They no more consider Jesus a real king than we would consider screwball actor Jim Carrey likely to be the next pope.

But therein lies the irony. Not only is Jesus *really and truly* the King of the Jews, but these silly soldiers have been given the awesome privilege of crowning him on his Coronation Day. Think of it: the King of the Universe, the Son of God, village-born in the humblest of circumstances and crowned king as a joke on the day of his crucifixion. This is the way God has arranged his inscrutable plan.

And having crowned him king, they spike him to his wooden throne. There he hangs in all his kingly glory! There he presides over his royal court, suspended between heaven and earth. His loyal subjects wander in and out of his throne room, hurling their jeers and mockery. His personal bodyguard lifts not a spear to preserve his dignity or defend his royal honor. This is what it means to be crowned Messianic King, King of all Creation.

One on his left and one on his right

Mrs. Zebedee's expectation has come to pass: Jesus is king in his kingdom. Just as Mrs. Z. knew it would, the time has at last arrived to appoint the royal ministers, to seat the king's own trusted lieutenants at his side. And just as Jesus had told her, it is not up to him to do the appointing. This royal authority is reserved, he said, "for those for whom it has been prepared" by the Father in heaven, and lo! the Father has already made his appointments. For enthroned beside the King, one on his left and one on his right, are not James and John, nor any of the other jealous disciples either. Instead, nailed like Jesus, each to his own wooden throne, one on the left and one on the right, are two insurgents, two common bandits. They are not the sort of people we would choose for the job—which of course is precisely why we were not asked to do the choosing. These men are not even willing to serve; instead they curse and revile the king. They want no part of him. But they do *die* with him; these nameless social misfits are in a way the very first people to take up their crosses and to die as Jesus dies, to die *with* him.

What a strange God we serve! He crowns his son with thorns and *hangs* him on his throne. He proclaims him king by putting him to death. Good Friday is a sad day, true enough. It is a day of black drapery and dismal darkness upon the earth. It is the day on which earth herself rejects her rightful ruler. Yet it is a day of unfathomed irony, a day on which we like Moses on the mountain catch a glimpse of God's back, a day on which we peer for a fleeting nanosecond into the mysteries of God's mind. It is the day on which we see what really matters in the Universe. We see that it's not political power and a suave, cool style. It's not enjoying an ever-rising presidential popularity rating, even though you shame yourself, your family, your office, and your nation before the entire civilized world. [This text was originally written in the late 1990s.] It's not a matter of having the best camera or taking the best pictures. It's not a matter of doing this or of doing that, of thinking this or of thinking that. It's not a matter of eloquence or intellectual acumen, or of wealth or wisdom. It's a matter of grace! The foulest sinner qualifies for the job; in fact only the foulest sinners need apply. If you think you're *good* enough for the job, you're not. Mere foul-mouthed thieves qualify before those of us who think *we* do. God is no more empowered by our qualifications than he is crippled by our faults. God is a God of grace.

The other disciples were ticked off at James and John and their Big Mama, but Jesus rebuked them. “This sort of thing is what they do in Washington, DC,” he said, “and in Pasadena, Dallas and Chicago. But among you it’s different; greatness for you is found in self-sacrificial service, not in power maneuvers. For I myself, the King of Creation, the Son of Man, came not to be served, but to serve and to give up my life as a ransom for many.”

Good Friday is Coronation Day for the King of Kings, and the cross is his throne. He is King because he dies for us, the thieves and sinners of the earth.