

**Matthew 20:17-28**

I'm not suggesting that you begin watching the show "Fear Factor." But if you have ever seen an episode or two, you will know that one of the competitions the contestants usually face is to eat or drink something despicable. Some simply cannot do it. They cannot choke down the disgusting filth. Those that do, do so only because of the thought that there is a large cash prize awaiting the winner.

In our text, James and John are of the opinion that they can handle the contents of any cup that is given them to drink. When Jesus asks them, "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" They eagerly answer, "We can!" They may share a resemblance to the macho man on "Fear Factor" who boasts that he can handle any vile liquid they can throw his way, but after the first gulp he quits the competition and walks out the door.

It's interesting to see how much James and John desire to drink the cup, but in Gethsemane Jesus pleads with His Father to take the cup away from Him. These two disciples were not aware of the contents that were in the cup—but they should have been.

Our text begins with Jesus telling His disciples about the awful road which lay ahead of Him. He is to be betrayed, condemned, mocked, flogged, and crucified. These are the contents of the cup He must drink. But the contents are best described with "why," instead of "what." More important than what they will do to Him, is why they will do it. He will endure this awful pain and suffering because He will be punished in our place. The physical suffering, therefore, as horrendous as that will be, is the least difficult part of that which awaits Him. The most vile part of the cup's contents is enduring the anger of His Father for our sins. The intensity of that anger can be called "hell's fury." Yes, the cup Jesus must drink is, literally, the cup of hell.

And there stand James and John saying, "We can drink that." They don't even have the courage to approach Jesus directly. They come to Him hiding behind their mother. And yet, they think they can handle the pain of hell? But that's why Jesus came to our world. We can't drink the cup. He came to save us from hell. He came to drink the cup so we don't have to. He endured hell's fury on the cross in our place.

Now before we get all "self-righteous" with regard to James and John, let's consider the fact that they speak for us all. The other disciples became angry with James and John, not because they asked Jesus for seats of honor, but because these two asked Him before they did.

We all want honor—James and John, the other disciples, and all of us as well. We want to be recognized for our accomplishments. We want the constant "pat on the back." We crave it from our neighbor. We desire it from God. But our thinking is the way of the Gentiles. It's shaped by this sinful world and our sinful flesh. And we don't understand the ways of God.

We were raised with a system of rewards and motivations. Much like Pavlov's dogs who enjoyed the reward of food after hearing the bell rung. We've been conditioned to believe that when we work hard for something, we're entitled to it as a reward. We're motivated by the monthly paycheck to put in our time at the office. To

achieve success we must put in the effort. And Scripture backs us up—“He who will not work, neither shall he eat.”

We get into trouble, though, when we force the world into the church; when we make the way things work among men, the way God must work. James and John believed they were entitled to places of high honor in God’s Kingdom. They had put in the effort. They were faithful disciples. They stood by Jesus through thick and thin. They were decent, God-fearing men. They deserved places at the very top.

And that’s how we think. You’ve heard funeral eulogies (although not here). They’re like resumes describing to God why the deceased is qualified for heaven. Maybe Grandpa doesn’t deserve the highest place, but he certainly deserves a place somewhere up there.

And those eulogies aren’t just read at funerals. We broadcast them to our neighbors the whole time we’re alive. “I did this, and I did that, for the church. And I haven’t done anything as bad as ‘so-and-so’ did.” During our life we are so focused on writing our own eulogies, that like James and John, we miss the meaning of what Jesus is telling us and doing for us.

“I’m going to Calvary,” He says. “I’m going to the cross. I’m going to suffer, and die, and rise again. I’m going to endure the sin of the world. I’m going to suffer hell for all sinners.” You know why Jesus is Lord of all? It’s not because He went to the top of the heap, but because He went to the bottom. “I didn’t come to be served (at the top),” He said, “I came to serve (at the bottom); to give My life for all.”

Jesus went up to Calvary to be placed on the bottom of the heap. He got down under us all. The weight of our sin was heavy upon Him. Isaiah writes, “He was crushed for our iniquities.” That was His cup to drink—all of our wretched, filthy sins; every last one of them; and the punishment of hell for all of them. He is Lord of all, with the highest honor of all, because He went to the lowest place of all—He drank the cup of hell for all sinners.

And this Servant, who drained the vile contents of that cup, keeps serving us by giving us a different cup to drink. “My cup you shall drink,” He told James and John. But it’s not the cup of wrath—it’s the cup of grace. Not the cup of hell, but of heaven. Not the cup of death, the cup of life. Not the cup of sin, the cup of forgiveness. On the night He was betrayed, as Jesus began drinking that awful cup, He gave to James and John, and the other disciples, a different cup—the same cup He gives us...the cup of His blood shed for us.

In this cup is nothing of sin and death. It contains only forgiveness and life. The cup of His Holy Sacrament is not the cup we deserve. We didn’t work for it. We didn’t earn it. Yet, He gives it to us freely by His grace. It’s the only cup He has to give. The cup of hell is empty. “It is finished!” He cried. He drained every last drop of its vile contents. That’s why our Epistle in Romans 8:1 states, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Because the cup of condemnation is empty. He drank it. In Christ we get only grace and forgiveness, because that’s the only cup He has left to give.

And He keeps on giving it to us. “My cup overflows,” the Psalmist writes. It is full of every drop of God’s love and mercy. And it will never run dry. You can never out-sin God’s grace. You can never do something so vile and wretched that He will not invite you

to receive His cup of forgiveness. James and John drank from that cup, as did the other disciples. And they were forgiven for their sin of seeking honor. They were forgiven for fighting with each other over greatness in God's Kingdom.

Those who are in Christ do not desire greatness and honor. Those who are of the world seek after those things. Those in Christ seek one thing—to drink of Christ's cup—the cup of His grace and mercy. The cup that gives forgiveness; that gives eternal life.

That cup is for you. He who made you His own in your Baptism, now gives you that precious cup to drink. It is full of mercy toward you. It overflows with forgiveness for you. Yes, you who live your life seeking the wrong things—greatness and honor, praise for your deeds, rewards in God's Kingdom. Jesus, on the cross, lowered Himself beneath you, to carry those sins of yours.

And so come...come, dear sinner, to His Table. Eat, drink, and live. Live forever in His bountiful grace. His cup is for you. Amen.