

Matthew 20:20-28 Overcoming Envy

Introduction

In a significantly high proportion of Christian weddings the Bible passage chosen for the occasion is from I Corinthians chapter 13. It is of course about relationships and about building relationships with God's love at the heart of it. But these are incredibly challenging words not a 'to do' list that can be easily ticked off. Listen to these words from I Corinthians 13:4-7: *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* Although the vows declared between the happy couple may easily be expressed that day, the living out of these convictions in the years that follow will be where the hard work is done with God's help. Being the man or woman God intends us to be over a life time is an incredibly high accomplishment that is much harder than attaining success in many a career or other sphere of life. The passage before us demonstrates that even the closest followers of Jesus are not immune from sinful and worldly desires that are inconsistent with the values of God's kingdom. It may be shock to you recognising how hard it is to live God's way day after day, year after year, but God does not lower His standards for anyone. He invites us all to follow in the footsteps of His beloved Son who modelled for us God's values and principles in an often hostile and unwelcoming world.

Our title today is 'Overcoming envy'. What is envy? It has been defined in this way: Envy is resenting God's goodness in the life of others while ignoring God's goodness in my own life [David Beer definition Purpose Driven UK]. It, therefore, implies that an individual experiencing real difficulties with envy of another person or people has got their perception of life in general or some particular aspects of it out of focus. If this is the case it suggests that an individual may choose to live in a way that is less than healthy for them and what is more may lead to unnecessary conflicts with other people and a less fulfilling life in the context of their current blessings than ought to be the case. There are some individuals, for example, who want to drive a particularly expensive and flashy car, or dress in impressive designer clothes or live in a prestigious home to a significant degree in order to cause other people to be envious of them. We might sit back in our seats and think well that's not me it is not my problem. That may very well be true, but can we honestly say we have never been envious of the circumstances of another person or people? I think very few if any could say truthfully I have never had an envious thought concerning someone else. Paul in Titus 3:3 wrote these unflattering words: *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. **We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.** Yet it is not just the past tense, because if people very close to Jesus on earth were afflicted with the problem of envy then we too ought to be on our guard today as well.*

1. What do you desire most of all? (Matthew 20:20-21)

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of Him. 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.'

(a) The context of this conversation (Matthew 20:17-19) *Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, He took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death ¹⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life!'* Jesus on a number of occasions had explained that the

purpose why He came was supremely to die on the cross as our sin-bearer and Saviour. It was only through His sacrifice that we would be only able to be reconciled with God and so enter His family and have eternal life. Jesus had to be the ultimate sacrifice, at such great cost, in order for us to be the people whom God has called us to be. This ought to have led to a moment of quiet reflection as these twelve men came to terms with the difficult days that lay ahead for Jesus and by implications also for them. Yet at that very time two of them with their mother chose to request a personal audience with Jesus in private in order to secure a first-class ticket to God's blessing ahead of all the other disciples. What on earth had made them ask for something so inappropriate?

Maybe the envious thoughts in their minds had been building up for some time and now they had overflowed and could not be retained inside them any longer. What is clear, though, is that they were so certain of their case that they could not even begin to see how such a request might impact on other people. What was totally unacceptable to other people seemed the most reasonable of requests to them. Why was there this division at the centre of the apostolic group? It is possible that they felt that being blood relatives - cousins - entitled them to greater privileges in God's kingdom. It is important for us to pause and acknowledge that if these individuals so close to Jesus and hearing Him personally set out His schedule for service could switch off and think what is in it for me then we too as sinful human beings must grant that this might at times be a challenge for each of us as well. Have you ever thought when working hard doing God's work, without the necessary support of other people, it doesn't seem fair me doing this and what recognition will I get for doing it anyway? Most of the time it doesn't matter but just occasionally temptations surface in our minds. How we deal with it is critical. For these men and their mother they were totally committed to following Jesus but they had a different agenda. God would help them work through it successfully, but it was an issue at this time. Are you struggling with envy just now concerning a work colleague who is getting an easier time of things? Or who got a promotion instead of you? Or in some other context? We are human beings who have our God-given emotions. We need with honesty between ourselves and the Lord to acknowledge when we are not dealing with something very well. Pretending we don't have a problem when we do will not resolve the difficulty. On the surface life looks very unfair in so many respects. The best way of dealing with it is to seek to put each issue in the bigger picture of God's eternal purposes for us. Romans 8:28 is true whether it feels like it or not! It states: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* Not all things are good! Some circumstances in life are the exact opposite of 'good', but what does God want us to remember here? Even in the most unpromising of situations you and I might face He is at work. Did you need to hear that today?

(b) **The content of this conversation** (Matthew 20:20-21) *Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of Him. 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.* As Christians who have put our faith in the Lord Jesus we know that we have direct access to God through Jesus, in other words that He hears our prayers. Does that therefore mean that we will get everything we ask for? Absolutely not! Our motivation for what we are asking is important. Is it truly for the glory of God that I am requesting this or simply to make life easier or more enjoyable for me? Paul had laid hands on many people and seen miraculous healings, yet was never healed of his *thorn in the flesh*. In II Corinthians 12:7b-10 Paul wrote: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'* *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in*

persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Almost certainly Paul would have told the Lord that he could do more effective work for Him if this problem was taken away- yet it never was removed. It was not a matter of faith or spirituality. In the providence of God He permitted this circumstance to remain a feature of Paul's life for the rest of his days. You will inevitably have issues for which you pray for which there is no apparent resolution. We will wonder 'why' and how God is glorified through the absence of the answer we have sought. This side of eternity we may never get an explanation but in simple faith we must trust that the Lord has a plan and purpose for our lives and if we are open to His leading and guidance that He will direct our path. In this request to Jesus Salome and her sons James and John had completely missed the point of the mission to which Jesus was calling them. Later they found fulfilment in serving the Lord as the Christian Church began in Jerusalem. However, at that stage had Jesus told them what lay ahead beyond the resurrection they might not have understood it. Likewise it is possible sometimes that the apparent delays we face in discerning God's will is due to His withholding of information that we would not be able to process appropriately at a particular moment in time. In effect we are called to trust God with our lives like a small child trusts their parent or parents with the confidence that He knows what He has planned for us. How are you getting on with trusting Him for your future?

2. Why might God not grant what we desire? (Matthew 20:22-23)

²² *'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said to them. 'Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?'* *'We can,' they answered.* 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. (a) **We can never see the full picture*** *'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said to them. As I obey the will of God and guarantee the future of the kingdom of God on earth do you really want to be on my right and my left? God's kingdom would come in through Jesus conquering sin and death and the evil one on the cross. There was no way they were in the right place spiritually to go with Jesus all the way to Calvary. They wanted a blood-free revolution; a sacrifice free launch and a comfortable spreading of the kingdom. James and John were faithful followers of Jesus, but they had yet to comprehend the nature of the kingdom that would be launched in a few weeks time. We must not be too harsh on them as we too are in exactly the same position today. We sincerely discuss and pray and seek God's will for us personally, for our families and for our church family and decisions are made in the light of the knowledge we have at the time, but it is almost always incomplete knowledge. The Lord might need to say the equivalent of: *'You don't know what you are asking,'* to us today –in terms of some of the petitions we bring to Him. Their sincerity was not in doubt, but their proposal was outside the will and plan of God both for their lives personally and the kingdom of God in general. Some times our requests are absolutely right but it is not yet God's time for them to be granted. Where this is the case we need to exercise patience –which can be very hard at times! (b) **We don't know God's plans for other people** When we pray about specific things for us personally - one thing I don't always take into account is what plans God might have for other people and how my request might impact the working out of His purposes for their lives. However, the Lord wants us as His children to come to Him with our requests but with an acknowledgement that His answer may be 'yes', 'no', or 'not yet'. In I John 5:14 it states: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* Jesus' first cautionary words ought to have made them think, but they pressed in asserting their claims. *'Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?'* *'We can,' they answered* (Matthew 20:22). A 'can do' attitude can only take us so far. You and I would be unlikely to consent to surgery at Ninewells Hospital if the person doing*

the operation was merely an enthusiastic volunteer from the street who wanted ‘to have a go’! This encounter for James and John was the equivalent of Peter asserting that He would never deny Jesus in Luke 22:31-34. (*‘Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.’³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’³³ But he replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’³⁴ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know Me.’*) Here are the three most prominent disciples in Jesus’ inner circle and they have each over estimated what they could accomplish for God and failed to grasp at that time what God was wanting to do in their lives. It ought to serve as a marker to us not to look enviously at another person’s life and wish we could swap places –who knows what trials they may experience which we know nothing about? Even in Christian work we may know only a part of the picture of how God is working or planning to work and with humility need to recognise that God still has much to reveal to us about His plans for our lives personally and collectively. Do I need to trust the Lord more about particular circumstances in my life just now?

3. Do I think of others when requesting what I desire? (Matthew 20:24-25)

²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 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. Why were they angry? Was it because they were disappointed that James and John had lowered the tone of things by thinking such worldly thoughts rather than leaving such matters to Jesus to work out? I fear not! It is almost universally understood that their anger was not righteous anger but frustration that they had not got in first to claim such a privileged position. ‘Mine’ ‘Mine’ we smile at the reaction of a toddler who is less than thrilled when asked to share some toys with another child. As adults we know better that it is good to share and think of other people not just ourselves. We will look at Philippians 2 later in this series that addresses that issue. However, the pattern of thinking here was a worldly one of pushing oneself forward at the expense of other people. It is so easy to be sucked in to viewing things in the same way as a significant proportion of society in general around us, rather than having a God-centred approach. Paul’s words in Romans 12:1-2 are so pertinent here. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.* ² *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.* If we do succeed in living what Paul teaches here expect to be in a minority, because human sinfulness is so pervasive and influential that even followers of Jesus at times make choices that fall short of the best and God-approved way He would prefer us to go. If we are angry at the behaviour of another person – stop and ask sometimes why am I angry? Is it because their words or behaviour were truly inappropriate or was it because I did not view their choices in a God-honouring way? – as happened here in Matthew 20. Sometimes it is very helpful to reflect on situations with another mature person or fellow believer and ask for their interpretation of a situation. Did I truly understand what was going on? Was my reaction appropriate or proportionate? On some occasions the answer will be absolutely! On other occasions it will be ‘no’. You need to give more weight to this consideration. You need to take into account that factor.

The Bible is full of illustrations of people who made inappropriate choices. Think of Cain who murdered his brother because he was envious that God favoured his brother’s worship offering more than his own in Genesis chapter four; think of Jacob’s older sons who sold Joseph into slavery because they were envious of his dreams and the implied higher status

that Joseph would have in his future calling (Genesis 37). In the New Testament envy over the success of Jesus' ministry was a key factor in the religious authorities wanting Him to be killed (John 11:47-50). It happened in the Early Church too. There were Christians involved in ministry who disliked Paul because of his 'success' in the Lord's work. In a letter written from prison he wrote these words: *Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.*¹³ *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.*¹⁴ *And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.*¹⁵ ***It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.***¹⁶ *The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.*¹⁷ ***The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.***¹⁸ ***But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice*** (Philippians 1:12-18). We can sometimes have an idealistic view of the Early Church that all its members were wonderfully humble and spiritual much more so than we lesser Christians today with all our faults and failings! They were no different to us!

Some words attributed to Billy Graham are very pertinent here: 'I defy you to show me a person who is both envious and happy.' Earlier in this message a definition of envy was given. Envy is resenting God's goodness in the life of others while ignoring God's goodness in my own life [David Beer definition Purpose Driven UK]. Am I guilty of that just now? There are Christians in smaller churches envious of the resources and people power of larger ones. There are Christians in para-church ministries envious of similar agencies which had a greater influence in churches. People in one network of churches likewise with another family of the Christian Church; Go round every sector of the Christian Church and this issue will at times rear its ugly head. But before we react in horror at such unspiritual people we might encounter in the ranks of the Lord's people, we need to look within in our own hearts. Can we genuinely rejoice in the successes of others –or have there been times when our congratulations have been less than wholehearted. It can be an issue for ministers too! Two churches have similar evangelistic mission events and one sees a number of converts and the other sees none. It is not always easy –especially if the pattern is repeated to be as joyful as we should. All of us will have had times when we envied someone else's success –maybe because we missed out on success at that time, or in some other way felt hard done to. Paul's words in Romans 12:15: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn* is sometimes very easy to practice, but on other occasions it can be very hard. Do you need to be prayed with to help you let go of a particular example of personal envy of another brother or sister or situation? There are times when we can address things on our own before the Lord but on other occasions we need help from other people.

4. **What the follower of Jesus ought to desire most** (Matthew 20:26-28)

(a) **Our calling** (Matthew 20:26-27) *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,*²⁷ *and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...* A Roman coin was once found with a picture of an ox on it; the ox was facing two things –an altar and a plough. The inscription read: 'Ready for either' [William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol.2, p. 231]. These words are very appropriate for our lives as Christians. Some Christians live only short lives but accomplish much more than many others who live twice as long; some believers have extraordinary numbers of opportunities to share their faith in public- not least the American Evangelist Billy Graham, but others live in places where there will be very few; we live in a location where we are free to live for God –the exact opposite of national

Christians in Saudi Arabia or North Korea. No two Christians will have exactly the same walk with the Lord through the same kinds of situations; although to many others around us our calling may be similar we need to trust the Lord that He knows what He is doing in what He permits to happen in blessings or challenges in our lives today. This is a hard thing to write, believe and to practise! Jesus' challenge to His disciples here in Matthew 20:26 is incredibly difficult sometimes to live out in practice. *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...* What do you find particularly difficult just now? What do I find difficult?

(b) **Our example** (Matthew 20:28) *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.* These words also found in Mark 10:45 are very familiar to us but we need to allow them to sink deep into our hearts, especially at times when we are feeling envious of other Christians or other people. It is also important to recall that Jesus did not find it easy to live this way either. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before He was crucified, He prayed in this way. *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed Him.⁴⁰ On reaching the place, He said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.'⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,⁴² 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.'⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.⁴⁴ And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.⁴⁵ When He rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, He found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.⁴⁶ 'Why are you sleeping?' He asked them. 'Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (Luke 22:39-46). Jesus overcame the challenge to walk away from His calling and so must we. Jesus kept His eyes on the mission which God the Father had entrusted to Him. May the Holy Spirit enable each one of us to overcome envy when it arises in our hearts and keep our eyes on Jesus, our example and role model as a servant as together we are building the kingdom of God here on earth, Amen.*

Week 3 Matthew 20:20-28 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Q1. Where does Jesus say envy comes from in Mark 7:20-23?
What does He say is the result of envy?
- Q2. What is the immediate context of this story –see Matthew 20:17-19?
Does this request that follows sit easily with it? If not, why not?
- Q3. Should we expect to get what we want from Jesus if we have enough faith?
See II Corinthians 12:7b-10.
- Q4. Why might God chose not to permit us to have what we seek?
- Q5. What assurance can we get from Philippians 4:19?
- Q6. What do we learn from the struggles of Jesus – see Luke 22:39-46?