



# *The King's Ransom*

Matthew 20:28

---

Text

Matthew 20:17-28

Topic

Jesus describes His ministry to us  
as that of a slave serving His Master

Title

*"33½ Years a Slave"*

## Introduction

Sean Combs claims to be an "Abbey-head." Michelle Obama requested advanced copies of the most recent series.

*Downton Abbey*, which debuted in the US in 2011, is the most popular drama in the history of PBS. The celebrities who claim to be obsessed with it include late-night talk-show hosts Conan O'Brien, Jimmy Fallon and Craig Ferguson, comedian Patton Oswalt (who live-tweets each episode), country star Reba McEntire and singer Katy Perry. Harrison Ford has hinted that he would consider a role in the program.

1 of 15

Matthew 20:17-28

*"33½ Years a Slave"*

In the hit show the Crawley family maintains an enormous stable of servants to care for them and their English estate.

The staff is described as being "in service," meaning not just employed as servants, but belonging to a class in society from which they probably would never rise.

"In service" today means something quite different. In service training is provided by an employer to further your education. It is on-the-job training in order to enhance your professional development.

All that to say we have very different ideas and attitudes about what it means to be a servant than in times past.

When Jesus says, "whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant," we therefore need a little clarification on exactly what kind of servant He means.

He gives it immediately, saying, "whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your **slave**."

Let's be honest - the idea of being *anyone's* slave is not appealing. But there it is, right from the lips of Jesus. And He backed it up, saying, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Jesus lived, and He died, as a servant. It impacts us, as believers, in that we ought to be dying to ourselves as we live for Him.

Let's see what that looks like. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Lived & Died As Your Servant, and #2 You Die To Life As Jesus' Servant.

## #1 Jesus Lived & Died As Your Servant

(v17-19)

The last words Jesus spoke in this section are extremely important.

Mat 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Jesus divided His mission into two parts: to "serve," and "to give His life a ransom."

- "To serve" is an excellent summary of His life on earth prior to the Cross.
- "Ransom" is an excellent summary of His death on the Cross.

These two parts, taken together, describe what Jesus did in order to obtain our salvation. In theological terms, they describe what is called the **atonement** - the way that sinful human beings are reconciled with a holy God.

A simple way of defining the atonement is that it is what Jesus did so that we, who were separated from God by sin, could be 'at-one' with Him again.

Jesus' whole life was that of a servant, and a suffering servant at that:

- We're told in Hebrews 5:8, "although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered."
- He endured suffering in the wilderness as He was tempted by Satan
- He knew suffering in the intense opposition of the religious leaders for most of His earthly ministry.
- Jesus wept when Lazarus died, and He wept over Jerusalem - indicating He was frequently moved to tears.
- As the Cross neared, His suffering was heightened in the Garden of Gethsemane, then culminated with the hideous things He endured up to and including the Cross.

Jesus served because He had to do something for the human race before He died for us. He had to perfectly fulfill the requirements of God's Law on our behalf, as our representative.

Adam represented the human race, but disobeyed; Jesus - sometimes called "the second Adam" - represented us, and obeyed.

Rom 5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Jesus served in order for us to be able to have His perfect righteousness imputed to us.

2Co 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The other word at the end of our text, "ransom," is a word we immediately understand as the payment of a price to secure the release of a person held captive.

The human race was held captive by sin and death and Satan. When Jesus died, He was our Substitute who bore the penalty for our sin, and therefore conquered both death and Satan.

We don't want to take the idea of ransom too far. There is a teaching, a false teaching, that Jesus paid the ransom to Satan, who held the human race captive.

Not true. Satan may be the god of this world, having usurped authority from Adam and Eve, but he is not the one who needs to be satisfied in order for us to be saved.

Jesus wasn't satisfying the devil in His death; He was destroying him, defeating him.

Ransom simply, but powerfully, communicates that the human race was held captive until One came along Who could pay the price required for our spiritual life.

Think of Jesus' life of service, and His ransom, as He makes the following remarks to His twelve disciples on their way to Jerusalem for the final time.

Mat 20:17 Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them,

Mat 20:18 "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,

Mat 20:19 and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again."

Every detail of what was coming was revealed to Jesus by His Father, then to the disciples by Jesus.

The Cross was no accident; it was not an afterthought.

We might say this: there was no other way for God to save us besides sending His Son to die in our place.

- In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "If it be **possible**, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).
- After His resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus said to the two disciples, "Was it not **necessary** that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:25-26).

We've taken a detour into some good theology. **Jesus did not stop to talk to His disciples to give them a lesson on the atonement.** When Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, it was to prep them for their own suffering service in His absence.

## #2 You Are To Die To Life As Jesus' Servant

(v20-28)

The disciples of Jesus are mostly criticized by commentators in this section for misunderstanding Jesus' comments about His impending agonizing suffering and death by crucifixion, as if they didn't really listen to what Jesus was saying.

I think they listened very closely, but decided to put the emphasis on what He said last: "and the third day He will rise again."

I'm not saying that they understood the resurrection; clearly, they did not. But His statement sounded hopeful enough for them to think that Jesus would, at that time, establish the promised kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

Jesus had just, in chapter nineteen, told them they would sit on twelve thrones in the kingdom, co-ruling the earth with Him. As usual, they were in kingdom-mode and wanted to know more about those thrones.

Mat 20:20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

Mat 20:21 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."

"Zebedee's sons" were James and John. Their mom was Salome. She was one of Jesus' earliest followers. She would be at the Cross, and was one of the women who went early on the first Easter morning to attempt to anoint Jesus' body.

She wanted what she thought was best - spiritually speaking - for her two boys.

The thrones on either side of the main throne were the ones that represented the most delegated authority. They were the top appointments.

Mat 20:22 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."

Jesus addressed His comments directly to James and John. He puts the brakes on their thoughts of ruling in His kingdom on the earth by letting them know something was going to precede it.

Drinking "the cup" Jesus was about to drink would precede the kingdom. "The cup" was a metaphor in the Jewish Scriptures for suffering. To "drink the cup" was to endure suffering.

To further emphasize the coming suffering, Jesus referred to it as a "baptism," which simply means *immersion*. They would be immersed in suffering prior to any thoughts of being seated on their thrones.

James and John did not yet understand what we see so clearly - that between the Lord's resurrection and His Second Coming to establish the kingdom there would be a church age during which the blood of many martyrs would flow.

Even though Jesus had said they didn't fully understand what He was saying, they answered His question, "We are able."

In retrospect, we see that they would be **enabled** by God the Holy Spirit.

Mat 20:23 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."

I'm thinking it was with great emotion that Jesus said this; with a lump, perhaps, in His throat. James would die a martyr's death, while John would live a martyr's life:

- Ten years into the church age, James would be arrested, then beheaded by Herod.
- John would be persecuted, eventually being exiled as an old man to the island of Patmos to suffer as a forced laborer.

James was the first of the apostles to die. John was the last. Tradition has him dying a natural death around 100AD in Ephesus.

Jesus' declaration, "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," has caused unnecessary confusion. It doesn't mean that He has no idea, or input, as to the future kingdom. It is simply Jesus putting Himself in the position of a servant - emphasizing what this entire passage is about.

In coming to the earth in the incarnation, Jesus submitted Himself to the will of God the Father. As the God-man, He lived a life in perfect submission as the suffering servant. In the future, even though exalted to rule, Jesus would remain a servant - leaving it up to God the Father to make throne-appointments in the kingdom.

There's a hint in Jesus' submission that positions must be earned. Salvation is free, but rewards and positions in the kingdom, and beyond, are the rewards of faithful service.

Keep that in mind as we discuss serving; serving The Lord has its rewards, and they are eternal.

Mat 20:24 And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.

It seems from a reading of all the Gospel's that the reason the other ten disciples were "displeased" was because they, too, aspired to the positions of greatest power and authority.

Mat 20:25 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.

We are encouraged, in the world, to have ambition, and to make progress in our endeavors. We're suspicious of folks who don't advance, who aren't promoted, who get passed-over.

When we become Christians, all of that gets turned on its head. A lot of the problems we have in church, in our relationships, have to do with our trying to maintain the world's model of leadership in a situation that calls for us to be just the opposite.

The verses that precede these told the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. We saw there that you ought to desire to bear the heat of the day, working hard every moment, in the Lord's service. We said that you should be getting stronger and working longer and harder the older you get - not dogging it and seeking to rest or retire. If those doing less seem to prosper, it should be nothing to cause you any concern, because you work for a generous Master and are not being, in any way, shortchanged.

Mat 20:26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.

"Servant" comes from *dia* and *konis* (dust), literally, *to raise a dust* by one's hurry, and so to minister. It is a general word for servant and is used in a variety of ways including the technical sense of "deacon." It is frequently is applied to ministers of the Gospel (1Corinthians 3:5).

In one sense, are all to be deacons - we are all to be raising a dust by our prompt and continuous service to others, both in the household of faith and outside of it.

Let's take a detour and talk about leadership in the church. There **are** positions of leadership in the church, as we await the coming of The Lord to resurrect and rapture us. There are pastors and elders and deacons.

You may or may not be aware that good men disagree over the exact form that the leadership of the church should take. There are three basic forms of church leadership, or church government:

- One is called episcopal, which is the New Testament term for *bishop* or, better, *overseer*. It typically expresses itself in a church as a pastor is seen as the overseer aided by elders and deacons.
- Another form of church government is called presbyterian, which is the New Testament term for elder. It typically expresses itself in a church as a group of men, the elders, co-lead with equal authority. Usually one of them serves as the teaching pastor, and there may or may not be deacons.
- Then there is congregational government, where all the members of a church have the ability and authority to vote on matters.

People get really passionate about the form of government they prefer, and can't help themselves, it seems, from criticizing any other form - going so far as to say any other form is unbiblical.

In First Peter 5:1-2, Peter instructs the elders to be good bishops as they pastor:

"Therefore, I exhort the elders [*presbuteros*] among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd [*pomaino*] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [*episkopeo*] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God."

In other words, Peter puts the emphasis on the **men**, not on the flow chart. More important than the outward form a church adopts and follows is the hearts of the men God raises-up to fill the various positions. God raises-up gifted men - pastors, elders, and deacons - and they serve together in the ways that best benefit the local church.

If you ask me what is our form of government, I hesitate to say it fits exactly into one of the three major categories. I'd like to think we have the best elements of all three, but that, bottom line, God has given our church godly men who work together, submitting to one another to best serve the body of Christ.

Mat 20:27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -

The word for "slave" is the familiar word *doulos*. It is best translated bond slave. Since slaves and slave ownership was very different among the Jews than our own understanding, it is best we read an explanation of the bond slave from Exodus.

Exo 21:2 If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.

Exo 21:3 If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.

Exo 21:4 If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself.

Exo 21:5 But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'

Exo 21:6 then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.

There are a couple of things to note about being a bond slave:

1. First, it is a much more serious state than that of a regular slave. Under Jewish law, slavery was intended to pay off debts, and in the seventh year, a slave must be set free. The slave who chose to become a bond slave was making a decision **to remain in that state for life**.
2. Second, though it was a voluntary decision, it is wrong to think of our serving Jesus as a type of volunteerism. We should see ourselves as bond slaves having made that decision as part of what it means to be saved.

It's true, The Lord doesn't force us to serve Him. But it isn't because we are free to choose to serve Him or not. Rather, if we do not serve Him, we are disobeying Him. By virtue of Jesus being our Lord and Savior, and seeing that He paid our ransom, we are bound to serve Him all the days of our lives.

And, according to what Jesus said here, and what we see in His life, we should expect serving Him to involve a measure of suffering.

It may not involve suffering; but that would be the exception, rather than the rule.

No matter how you define it, this idea that you are a slave doesn't sit well. We're celebrating our independence this weekend. We are a freedom-loving bunch. We talk about the price of freedom as citizens of our great nation; it's hard to shift gears and talk about the price of slavery as a citizen of the kingdom of Heaven.

There's no getting away from it. If you're confused about being a bond servant, all you have to do is look at Jesus. He's the example:

Mat 20:28 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 whole purpose of the incarnation can be summed up in two words - *serve* and *give*.

Let's take a pop quiz regarding our discipleship. If someone looked at my life - at your life - would they be able to say it is summed up in the two words, *serve* and *give*?

**What two words *would* describe my life, or your life?**

Be honest with yourself and then let The Lord enable you to move in the direction of being more like Him as a suffering servant.

We don't want to be runaway slaves, seeking our freedom in the world. Jesus didn't serve and give His life a ransom so we could continue to be in love with the world and pursue its idolatry.

One more thing. Jesus said He gave His life "a ransom for many." We learned, in our last study, that in English, the word "many" is restrictive, but **in Greek it is inclusive.**

In other words, if I say "many of the people came," in English, it implies that most of them did not. If I said the equivalent of "many of the people came," in Greek, it would imply that practically everyone did.

Jesus had just spoken of "many being called," but "few" being chosen. The Greek usage divides the whole into two unequal parts, which are called "the many" and "the few." In Greek, "the many" and "the few" **add up to everyone**.

When Jesus said He gave His life a ransom for many, He meant that His death on the Cross is sufficient to put away all the sins of all the world. But it is effective only for those who accept Him as Lord and Savior.

If you haven't accepted Him, come to The Lord, to the Cross, and have your sins forgiven.

If you're a believer, you're His bond servant. It's not really voluntary, and there's a price to pay... But, in the end, His "Well done, my good and faithful servant," will overrule any suffering you must endure now in His service.