

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

From Altitude To Attitude

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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While serving as a youth pastor in Arizona after I graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary, I got educated quickly regarding how to keep a swamp cooler functioning effectively to keep your house semi-comfortable during the hot, simmering summer months. I climbed onto the flat top roof with all my tools and within a few minutes I started taking the unit apart so I could paint tar onto the bottom water holding tank. I don't know if you've ever worked with tar, but it's not only smelly it is very sticky. I tried to be careful; however, it wasn't long until I had tar just about everywhere. Seems like one little dab in the wrong location, quickly became another dab in another unwanted area. And it didn't wipe off either, but basically ruined whatever it touched.

Thinking back about this adventure from 1987, I can't help now but see how tar reminds me of the nature of sin. Touching a little sin quickly advances to touching a whole lot of sin. Yes, the more you touch the sin the more it gets all over you. In typical tar style the author of Hebrews writes these wise words:

¹ Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12).

The metaphor here is from the running world in Grecian times, and it has a one to one correspondence with spiritual living. As an effective runner puts aside things which would keep him from being the best runner possible, things like unhealthy foods or fun activities which would cut into his training time, so saints should constantly seek to not be so tied up with the demands of life they can't give adequate time and attention to following hard after Christ. And then the author adds we are to be ever mindful, individually speaking, of getting away from sin which typically gets us all tied up, or which becomes like a tar to us. One of the ways we can steer clear of those innocent looking, but highly destructive tar babies, is to be devoted to focusing on the person and work of our Lord. By studying Him well we will be equipped to endure and not get all entangled.

Take an honest appraisal of your life right now and ask yourself: "What sinful tar is all over me?" I'm sure you have already identified it, haven't you? You hadn't touched it in a while; however, for a variety of reasons, you recently touched it and now your theme song could easily be Lionel Richie's *Stuck On You*. What should you do if this is you? The Lord's personal teaching to His disciples as He headed one last time up to Jerusalem from the Jericho region will give you the insight you desperately need to be able to live a victorious life as a disciple. The timely teaching is inscribed on the parchment of Matthew 20:20-28. Here we come face to face with a concept we encountered also in Hebrews 12:

Following Jesus Christ Calls For Mindful Balance (Matthew 20:20-28)

A saint out of balance will be stuck to his own personal and sinful tar, be what it may. The converse is true as well. A saint in balance will be freed to focus on following hard after Jesus in this life. All of this makes you pose a practical question to yourself: "Is my spiritual life out of or in balance?" What does a balanced Christian life look like anyway? From the verses in this section, two principles emerge to answer the pragmatic query.

Don't Touch Your Tar (Matthew 20:20-24)

While you are thinking about what your sinful tar might be, you know, it's the carnal activity that once you touch it gets stuck all over you, let's focus for a moment on the tar of the disciples:

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. ²¹ And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left."

Talk about an aggressive mother! Before we get into her humble request, I invite you remember the immediate context.

Peter had just asked Christ, "Say, Lord, what do we, who have given up everything to follow you, yes, what do we get in the kingdom age?" Jesus answered the prideful, selfish question (Matthew 19:27-30) and informed Peter, as well as the other disciples who had the same concern, that thrones to rule over Israel would be theirs in the messianic kingdom. However, He followed up his promise with a parable about some workers to demonstrate that

the bad attitude of the disciples might cost them a throne (or two) if they didn't learn the art of humility in service (Matthew 20:1-16). He, then, turned and told them they should be continually focused, above all things, on His up and coming death and resurrection (Matthew 20:17-19).

All of this brings the words of the mother of James and John into bolder relief. Jesus just spoke prophetically about His imminent death and resurrection to defeat sin once and for all and provide forgiveness for sinners, and this mother, along with her sons, are still stuck on power, prestige, and placement. Matthew does say the mother of these disciples posed request; however, in Mark's parallel account we learn that James and John spoke up too (Mark 10:35ff). This exchange is so jaw-dropping and instructive we have to stop and make some additional observations.

First, who was the mother of James and John? She was Salome, the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, making her the aunt of Jesus and her sons, the cousins of Jesus. What was she up to? Using her kinship ties to manipulate Jesus to make sure her boys had the two key thrones located on the left and right of the Messiah. Shocking, isn't it? She wasn't content with her sons to have thrones to judge over the messianic Israel. No, she wanted them to have the two top thrones. What nerve! What a prideful request!

Second, Salome probably spoke first. Why do I say this? Because James and John, along with the other disciples had just been verbally reprimanded by Jesus for their inappropriate attitude about power and position. Hence, it's only logical to think they put their mother up to this, thinking that perhaps she could get the results they wanted in the kingdom. But given their highly emotional demeanor and zeal to secure the prime thrones next to Jesus, she no sooner started speaking than they chimed in as well. Do you smell the tar? They didn't.

James and John, along with the other disciples, continually got the tar called pride, power, and placement stuck all over their spiritual bodies. So captivated with their own advancement that even Christ's foretelling of His eventual brutal death and resurrection didn't deter them from their ill-founded position. Trust me, their sin is still alive and well today.

I've seen it on worship teams. You know how it works. One person thinks they are the star, the gifted one; therefore, they want to be showcased more often than not. Years ago as a young pastor, I had a talented lady who became a viable part of our growing worship team. Her voice was excellent, and her stage presence was professional. Her attitude, however, couldn't have been more wrong. She wanted her voice showcased continually and when it became apparent she wouldn't be given perpetual opportunities to be the star, she moved on to another church.

I've seen it on elder councils. Back in the 90s I had an elder who was, in my estimation, one of the best lay Bible teachers I have ever heard. He drew crowds and had a unique ability to open up the Word of God. Talking with him one day, however, I heard the voice of James and John. Looking at me he said, "Of all your elders, I am the most suited for the position because of my teaching gift." Woa. He just basically said he was head and shoulders above the other gifted elders. How audacious! How presumptuous!

Do you struggle with the tar of pride, power, and placement? Do you think you are a cut above everyone else? Do you think you should be elevated in some way because God has given you such a unique gift or gifts? You know, you can easily tell if you struggle with this tar by how to respond to those times when you are passed over, or when others are given opportunities you think should be given to you because you are so much more qualified. If you get your feelings hurt when you aren't showcased, if you get miffed when your abilities are not tapped to

the extent you think they should be, you, my friend, probably have the tar of pride, power, and placement stuck all over you.

If you truly desire to grow up and mature in Jesus as His disciple, you'll need to ask Jesus to help you get this particular sticky sin off you before you go any further. Jesus sought to help James and John move onward and upward spiritually with His next exchange. I'm sure His words just might speak to you as well:

²² But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father."

Expressions of selfish ambition by believers are always foolish for they fail to take into consideration the true cost of walking with Jesus. What is that cost? It's called drinking from His cup. And what is His cup? It's called divinely ordained suffering and affliction and complete sacrifice even unto death.

James and John arrogantly said they were more than ready to drink from this cup, but at this juncture their pride kept them from understanding the totality of Christ's words. In due time they learned that placement on messianic thrones is preceded by suffering for the name of Jesus. James would eventually become the first martyr among the apostles under wicked rule of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1-3). Agrippa would kill him with a sword in order to procure the positive support of the Jewish religious authorities. John would be persecuted under the reign of Caesar Domitian and eventually be exiled to the lonely isle of Patmos. Thrones would await them at the revelation of the Messiah at the end of time; however, the path to those thrones would not be easy.

All of this serves to keep pride, power, and prestige in check, doesn't it? The person who is following closely after Jesus will, by definition, be opposed by the world at large. While their life as a disciple will certainly know the joy of walking with the living Savior (John 10:10), suffering and affliction will be the tools God will use to keep them humble and dependent on Him. Paul was well-acquainted with this divine method. Speaking to the Corinthians believers who constantly attacked his pastoral leadership, he quipped:

²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11).

Show me a saint who walks humbly with Jesus and I'll show you one who knows the cost and benefit of drinking from the cup of Christ. If pride is your sinfully sticky tar, may the Lord use the cup of affliction in your life to move you to meek, humble, selfless service. From what we

read in the rest of the New Testament, James and John got the memo and finally grew up in the faith. This means there is hope for us.

But there will always moments where you'll be challenged to put this particular sin to rest. The response of the other twelve disciples to the request of Salome and James and John is most instructive:

²⁴ And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers.

Most commentators see this response as being based on one up-manship pure and simple. David Garland says, "... the other disciples fume because James and John beat them to the punch and may have gained an edge on the power slots ..." ¹ D.A. Carson notes, "The indignation of the ten (v. 24) doubtless sprang less from humility than jealousy plus the fear that they might lose out." ² I couldn't agree more.

Isn't it interesting how quickly pride, power, and placement, like tar, gets stuck all over us? Just let someone else get to do something before us, just let someone "less worthy than us" get a promotion, just let someone be placed in a situation where they will be seen by others instead of us, just let someone make rank we don't think is as qualified as we are who didn't make rank, just let someone's child get an academic break over our child who struggles, yes, just let life happen and we, like the disciples, will instantly get jealous and upset that we are not getting our much needed recognition.

God. Show us our selfish sin. God. Show us our jealousy over the blessings of others. Lord, show us ourselves so we can, by your grace and power, get this tenacious tar off of us once and for all. This is the first step in securing the proper balance we all need to lead effective lives as kingdom members. A second is equally important:

Do Model Your Master (Matthew 20:25-28)

Jesus wasted no time gathering all the disciples around Him so He could help them understand how He expected them to live:

²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.

Greatness to the disciples was, unfortunately, related to the carnal concepts of the world. Christ probably had the Roman Empire here in view in these words. The rule of the Caesars was built completely upon the foundation of the domination of and over people. In despotic fashion they held absolute power over their subjects, and those subjects were there to serve and obey them as the rulers. These men of power and prestige were seen a great men of their day because of their position.

Jesus breaks the paradigm of the world with His ensuing teaching:

²⁶ "It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;

¹ David Garland, *Reading Matthew* (Smyth & Helwys: Macon, Georgia, 2001): 212.

² D.A. Carson, *Expositors Bible Commentary*.

Greatness in God's eyes is not tied to being served by others but in serving others. James and John, along with the other disciples, had wrongly adopted the ambitious ways of the world in relation to being Christ's disciples. They figured that since Jesus was the Messiah and King they were somebody, and because they would occupy thrones in His kingdom, they should be elevated above others who had not attained their spiritual stature. They couldn't have been more mis-directed, spiritually speaking.

To Jesus, greatness is a fight for the bottom, not the top. To Jesus, greatness is tied to serving, not in enjoying your power and position over others, as Diotrephes exhibited in 3 John 9. He loved his position of power and authority in the local church and used it to get his selfish way. Diotrephes, obviously, forgot that the greatest leaders are those who know the value of serving others.

Jesus, of course, is our perfect example.

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."

He willingly left His glorious throne in heaven to become the perfect servant who would lay His holy life down in order to redeem us from the power and presence of sin. Paul echoes the words of Jesus here in Philippians 2:

⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Mark Paul's words well. He calls us to have the same attitude of Jesus. He became a humble servant to eventually bless others by His selfless and perfect sacrifice for their sin. He poured out His life so many lives would be filled up by His selfless effort. We can emulate our Lord's life insofar as we, too, can give our lives in selfless service to meet the varying needs of others, whether that be inside our outside the church.

Servanthood. It's the model our Master has left for us. What are true servant minded disciples like?

- Servants look for opportunities to serve others. Inside our body there are plenty of places for you to meet needs. With 170 workers needed each week just to run the children's program, there are plenty of servant positions. With many of our people reaching out to the poor living in the woods down in Woodbridge, there is a place for you to serve the needy too. If you are serious about maintaining balance in your Christian walk, you'll be known as one who scours the horizon each day of there you can touch a life.
- Servants don't get all bent out of joint when someone else excels beyond them. No, they are truthfully excited for the person.

- Servants do jobs which usually aren't the most glamorous. Stacking hundreds of worship chairs after the fourth service every now and then isn't the most exciting venture, but it is so necessary to ministry. Volunteering on the parking team isn't the sure fire way to fame, but it is a sure fire way to greatness before God because you are giving yourself to a service which helps others. Are you willing to do the job no one else will probably jump at, the job which will place you in obscurity? Go for it. It's what Jesus would want.
- Servants thrive when they are anonymous. Put differently, true servants do not live for others knowing their names or even what they do. They are quite content to quietly serve others without any undo recognition from others.
- Servants are known as givers. Yes, they don't hold onto their assets and goods with white knuckles, but they live with open hands, looking for ways to give to needs God brings across their paths.

Are you a servant of Christ? Is this not the question?

Just think. What kind of impact will we have as a church when servanthood becomes our collectively heartbeat? What kind of marriages will we have when the saints involved in those marriages give themselves to serving instead of being served? What kind of relationships will we have when they are built on the soil of humble service to each other? What kind of Christian witness will we have when the world around us sees us being the hands and feet of Christ to the needy around us? What impact will you have at school when you start living as a servant focused on meeting the needs of others on campus? You will most certainly stand out since most around you will be consumed with their own self-elevation. What will be different about your place of employment when you are known as a person who isn't afraid to serve others, even if you are the boss or the person in charge?

Remember, Jesus is our model. He died a substitutionary death to secure divine forgiveness for us. How can we, then, in light of what He has accomplished, not walk as He walked? He served us so He could redeem us. Out of love for Him we must return in kind by serving as He served.

Preachingtoday.com has a story about servanthood we all can benefit from.

In the realm of sports superstars, Mike Murphy plays a small but essential role for his pro baseball team, the San Francisco Giants. Recently, he helped the Giants win their first World Series in 52 years, and Mike was on the job for the entire 52-year journey. But you won't find his name on the scoreboard. You won't see him endorsing new products for millions of dollars per advertisement. He'll never make it into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

"Murph," as they call him, has been with the team since 1958, starting as the team's batboy, before moving up to his roles as the clubhouse attendant and finally the equipment manager. Throughout his 52 years of faithful service, Murph has worked behind the scenes, cleaning shoes and ordering bats, so his much more famous teammates could achieve success.

According to an article in *The New York Times*, "If anyone embodies the 52-year endurance test the San Francisco Giants underwent to reach baseball's summit, it is Mike Murphy." That's one reason why the owner of the team handed the World Series trophy to Murphy so he could present it to his ecstatic teammates. At some point during the wild post-game celebration the reported noted, "[Murphy] turned to a clubhouse attendant and pointed to some bags. There was equipment to be loaded on to a truck ... Murphy was back at work." (*David Waldstein, "Keeper of Giant's Bats and of Team's History," The New York Times (10-3-10).*)

Murph's attitude merely reflects what Jesus was talking about. As Murph selflessly serves others so they can excel, will you become spiritual Murph to those on your team?