

AMBITION FOR POSITION BEING CONTRARY TO THE KINGDOM LIFE

Scripture Reading: Matt. 20:20-28; 23:8-12; 21:4-9, 15-16, 23-27, 28-32, 33-45

Now we need to consider several passages in Matthew that are connected by a single underlying thought: **ambition for position**. The first portion is Matthew 20:20-28. **There we see that the ambition to be great, to be a leader, and to be in authority is deep within fallen man. The source of this ambition is the rebellion of Satan.** The man whom God created did not have the nature of being ambitious, of desiring leadership and greatness, or of possessing authority. The source of this ambitious nature is not the creation of God but the rebellion of Satan. This ambition for position is in Satan's fallen nature. Satan fell because of his ambition. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 reveal that Satan was originally a high cherub, an archangel, who was quite good when he was created. But at a certain time he entertained the thought of being equal with God and rebelling against God. This is the fallen nature of the devil. When man was tempted by the devil and fell, the evil nature of Satan was injected into him. Thus, within the human nature of both men and women is the ambition of being greater than others, of being the "chief." If you are a sister, you certainly will want to be the chief sister. If you are unable to be the chief among ten thousand, at least you want to be the chief among ten. This is our fallen nature.

THE TWO SONS OF ZEBEDEE

When the mother of the two sons of Zebedee requested that her sons sit at the Lord's right and left hand in the kingdom, the Lord Jesus exposed the ambition of fallen man. **Not only did those two disciples have such an evil ambition, but the others had it as well. The other ten were very indignant over the request of these two, indicating that all twelve disciples were exactly the same.** They were the same in their ambition.

We all must be aware of this problem. Deep within all of us there is the hidden ambition to be a leader and to be above others. We do not like to be under anyone. Instead, we desire others to be under us. This thought in our fallen nature originated from Satan and is absolutely against the kingdom of God.

As He dealt with this situation, the Lord Jesus set up an excellent example for us. **He told the mother that He was not authorized to give her sons such a position, that only the Father had the authority to decide where to place her two sons. Thus, the Lord Jesus Himself took a submissive position, thereby setting a proper example for all His disciples.**

In the kingdom of the heavens there should be no ambition for position. In a sense, there is not even any position. The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27). The Lord said that we should be not only servants but bondslaves, slaves sold to others. Then He presented Himself as an example, saying, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (v. 28). After the Lord Jesus said this, every mouth was shut.

THE PHARISEES AND SCRIBES

Now we come to Matthew 23:8-12. In this chapter the Lord Jesus rebuked the scribes who knew the Bible so well and the Pharisees who were so religious, calling both of them hypocrites. He rebuked them eight times, saying, "Woe to you." Eight times the Lord Jesus called them hypocrites.

In chapter 5 we have nine times of blessing; in chapter 23 we have eight times of woe. Before He rebuked the hypocrites, He told His disciples not to take the way of the Pharisees, who were always ambitious. They liked to have a position and were always presuming and assuming. His disciples should never be like that. **The greatest among them must serve the others. Whoever exalts himself will be abased; whoever humbles himself will be exalted. The economy in the kingdom of the heavens is absolutely different from all the governments of the world.** The economy of the kingdom differs even from our own mental economy. In the economy of the kingdom, to gain is to lose, and to lose is to gain; to be great is to be small; to be exalted means to be abased, and to be abased means to be exalted.

My burden is simply to show you that to be ambitious is satanic. Ambition is contrary to the economy of God's kingdom. In the church, by His mercy and by His life, we must reject every kind of ambition. Every ambitious thought, will, and desire has its source in Satan. Satan is the embodiment of all ambitions.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates the problem of ambition. When I first came to Shanghai in 1933, I met a brother who was very “hot” for the church. He was exceedingly active. I was a stranger and a newcomer to the church there, and he was very good and “hot” toward me. At times he was more than hot—he was boiling. Something that is too hot hurts people. You cannot wash your face with boiling water and not injure yourself. At that time, I was ignorant and thought, “This brother is such a good brother, so warm toward me.” Later, I discovered that since the day he had come into the church in 1927, he had expected to be one of the elders. This ambition disqualified him from being an elder. I know this because Brother Nee eventually told me the whole story. Fifteen years later the ambition still remained. Although many new ones had been given some responsibility, this brother was left untouched. No one could touch him because the ambition was still there. Eventually, he left the Lord's recovery and started a meeting in his home, getting a traveling preacher to be the minister. His ambition frustrated him from enjoying the church life and kept him from bearing any responsibility.

As long as we have that kind of ambition within us, the Lord can do nothing with us. Eventually, we will be snared by Satan, the ambitious one. This is not a small thing. In our experience over the past years we have seen quite a number of cases like this. Some of the dear ones loved the Lord and had the ability and the intention of doing something for the Lord, but they were unable to do so because of their ambition. Ambition is terrible! We can never have ambitious ones in positions of leadership; they will damage the whole church life.

A KING COMING IN HUMILITY

We continue with Matthew 21:4-9. This passage seems to be unrelated to the matter of being ambitious and seeking greatness. Here the Lord Jesus was truly the King. Yet He was not ambitious. He had no ambition of being a king, but He was, in reality, the King. The kingdom was His, and the people were for Him. **How then did He enter Jerusalem? Did He ride upon an excellent Egyptian horse? No! He came as the unique King, riding upon a donkey, in genuine humility. He came as a king, but He came in the form and the appearance of humility.** This is very good. How marvelous it would be if some of the dear ones among us would be very useful, very much anointed, and full of life, yet their form and appearance would be so humble. We should not have the attitude, “I am really anointed! I am very gifted, and I must have the highest position.” We should never be like this. The Lord Jesus came as the King in a humble way. He did not ride on a horse or even on a

grown donkey. He rode upon a baby donkey. Nearly everyone was for Him, yet He entered the city in a humble way.

Then the people spoke for Him. They took off their garments and spread them on the road. My concern is not to pass on the doctrinal knowledge of this portion of the Word but to point out its significance in life. We need to see the living significance. The significance of this instance of the Lord's walk is that, although He was King, He did not assume any form or appearance. He came as the real King in a humble way, and He did not speak a word for Himself. The people spoke for Him by casting their garments and palm branches on the road.

When the Pharisees saw this, they were jealous, but they pretended to be religious. Actually, they were not that religious; they were simply jealous of the Lord Jesus. They were bothered that a little Nazarene should receive such a celebration. Even the little children in the temple were crying and shouting, "Hosanna!" The Pharisees considered such crying to be out of order. Why was He allowing the children to shout and cry for Him in the temple? That is the place for people to worship God. They should come into the temple with reverence. Why did He not rebuke all these children? It seems that the Pharisees were quite religious. Actually, however, it was not a matter of being religious; it was a matter of jealousy.

Because they were being religious and scriptural, the Lord Jesus said to them, "Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and sucklings You have perfected praise'?" (v. 16). His response indicated that it was not wrong for the children to cry and to shout "Hosanna!" It is absolutely scriptural and fundamental. The same response can be made to the Christianity of today. Some people have come into our meetings and asked, "What kind of Christian service is this? With all the shouting, it is like a basketball game or a football game." But I would ask them, "Have you never read the verses in the Old Testament about shouting and praising loudly?" (Ezra 3:10-11; Psa. 5:11; 95:1; 100:1).

THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ELDERS

The chief priests and the elders then came to the Lord Jesus (Matt. 21:23-27). The chief priests held high positions in religion, and the elders held notable positions in the community. They asked the Lord, "Who gave You this authority?" (v. 23). This question shows the connection between this passage and the passages we have already covered. The underlying thought of ambition and authority connects these portions of Matthew, just as the washing of hands, the eating of crumbs, and the leaven connected those in chapters 15 and 16. *The disciples were ambitious for authority and position, but the Lord Jesus conducted Himself in an unassuming way. Although He was the King, He did not assume the kingship. The opposers, the religious and community leaders, also had ambitious thoughts.* "Who is this little man from Nazareth? Who gave Him this position and authority? We are the high priests and the elders. Who is He?"

Once again we see the wisdom of the Lord Jesus. When they asked Him concerning His authority, He asked them about the authority of John the Baptist. "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come, from heaven or from men?" (vv. 24-25). The Lord Jesus, of course, knew everything. The priests should have known not to play with the Lord Jesus. When the Lord Jesus asked the priests and the elders about the baptism of John, they were caught in a corner.

The priests and elders realized that they had a problem. "They reasoned among themselves, saying, If we say, From heaven, He will say to us, Why then did you not believe him? But if we say, From

men, we fear the crowd, for all hold John as a prophet” (vv. 25-26). They did not know what to do. Finally, they followed the father of lies and said, “We do not know.” The Lord Jesus replied, “Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things” (v. 27). He realized that they knew but were unwilling to tell Him. For them to say that they did not know was a lie. So the Lord said, “Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

The Lord Jesus continued by telling a parable that offended them: “What do you think? A man had two children. And he came to his first son and said, Child, go today and work in the vineyard. And he answered and said, I do not want to; yet later he regretted and went. And he came to the other and said likewise. And he answered and said, I will, sir; yet he did not go. Which of the two did the will of the father? They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and the harlots are going into the kingdom of God before you” (vv. 28-31).

By this parable the Lord Jesus put the tax collectors and harlots above all the Pharisees. The Pharisees thought that they were on top and that the tax collectors and harlots were under their feet, but the Lord Jesus put the Pharisees on the bottom. **John had come according to the way of righteousness, and when the tax collectors and harlots had heard his preaching, they changed their minds and repented. But the Pharisees did not repent, so the Lord ranked them below the tax collectors and harlots.** Do you see the wisdom of the Lord Jesus in this parable? Once again we have the line of who is first, greater, or higher than others.

The Lord continued with another parable (vv. 33-45). He told them of a man who owned a vineyard and hired people to take care of it for him. At a certain time the owner sent his slaves to collect the fruit. The vinedressers killed the slaves, and when the householder sent other slaves, they also killed or beat them. Finally, the householder sent his own son, thinking that the vinedressers would surely respect him. However, in an attempt to seize the inheritance, they killed the heir. This parable was the Lord’s answer to the question concerning His authority. “What is My authority? My source? My position? My source is My Father. I am His Son. This is My position. My Father gave Me this authority.” According to the parable, the rebellious ones realized that the heir had come and were saying, “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him” (v. 38).

Then the Lord went on to say, “Have you never read in the Scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, this has become the head of the corner...?” (v. 42). **By this word the Lord showed them that He was the Son of God who had come to receive God’s inheritance. They would kill Him out of hatred, but afterward He would become the resurrected cornerstone for God’s building.** This building would be with another people, and by this building, God’s kingdom would be taken from them and given to others. Those other people would be the building of which He would be the cornerstone. The Lord continued, “This was from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (v. 42). Then He said, “He who falls on this stone shall be broken to pieces” (v. 44). The Jewish people, the Jewish nation, and Judaism itself—all would fall upon Him and be broken. Also, “On whomever it falls, it shall crush him to powder and scatter him like chaff” (v. 44). Here we see **three aspects of Christ as the stone.** He is the chief cornerstone for the building of the church, but He is the stumbling stone to the Jewish people. All the Jewish people, including the Jewish nation and religion, fell upon Him and were broken. According to Daniel 2:34-35, He will be the stone from heaven that will fall upon the earthly nations and break them into pieces. **To the church He is the chief cornerstone, to the unbelieving and rebellious Jews He became the stumbling stone, and to the Gentile world He will be the smiting stone.**

The priests and the elders had questioned the Lord Jesus concerning His authority and origin. The Lord Jesus answered them in a very mysterious and offending way. The Pharisees realized that He was talking about them. **Actually, the Lord Jesus was not talking about them. He was talking about Himself. He was revealing Himself as the Son of God, as the rejected and resurrected cornerstone for the building of the church, as the stumbling stone to the unbelieving Jews, and as the smiting stone to all the Gentile nations. He is the all-inclusive One. He is everything. He is for God, and He is for the church. He will deal with the Jews, and He will deal with the Gentile world. Only the Lord Jesus has the wisdom to speak such a word.**

Do not be ambitious for a position, but be zealous for Christ. Christ is not only versus religion; He is also versus position. Forget about position, leadership, and greatness. We all must be zealous for Christ. Christ is my position. Christ is my greatness. Christ is everything to me. He is the Son of God, He is the Heir of God's inheritance, and He is also the cornerstone that is rejected, resurrected, and chosen by God for His building. As the stone, He will be the judging stone to the unbelieving Jews and over all the Gentile nations. Christ is everything! So we must forget about ambition for position and be zealous for Christ.

(The Kingdom, Chapter 29)