# It Shall Not Be So Among You

## On the Three Predictions of Death and the Disciples Who Kept Trying to Climb

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### The God We Project

One of the reasons there is a widespread narrative of an *evil God*, or a *domineering God*, is that human beings are projecting creatures. We project our own feelings onto others, whether that *other* is God or another person. I cannot tell you how many people complain that everyone at work dislikes them, and the list of those complainers turns out to be exactly the list of people they themselves dislike. *Which came first?* That is always the question.

The only thing we know about the God of Israel, about the Christian God, is what we read from the Scriptures. And so we will take the most distasteful elements of the text, or the elements we superimpose our own life experiences onto, and *that* becomes our rendering of who God is. Art critics often get out of a painting what they bring to it. So do Scripture readers. The God we end up projecting can be little more than a mirror of our own hearts.

And when you look at the *domination systems* of the world (economic controls, political power, religious institutions, philosophical schools) you find that every one of them uses certain tools for power. The philosopher uses words. The politician uses power. The economist and the businessman use money. The religious leader uses the categories of sin and righteousness. And in each system, *some get all the goodies and others are marginalized to the periphery*. Some are

central and eat with the fine china; others get paper plates and sit with the unwashed masses. That is the structure of every domination system.

It is not because people who build businesses do not want to do good. Not because politicians do not want healthy societies. Not because religious people do not want healthy families. The intentions are usually there. We just *cannot help ourselves*. We begin to insert our own images into the spaces we manage. And the result is a system that looks more like the manager than like the Maker.

If Jesus were here, he would say what he actually did say: *It shall not be so among you* (Matthew 20:26). How many people have rejected God on the basis of past experiences that were not, in fact, a true reflection of God, *usually delivered to them by the people who claim to know God best*? God help us. God help us that we could actually be a community of believers humble enough, and lacking the ambition that is characteristic of humanity, that the God people see *through us* would resemble the God Jesus actually came to reveal.

## The Rich Young Ruler and the Pride That Follows

Let me back up into Matthew 19 and 20, because what I want to show you is one of the deepest pastoral arcs in the entire Gospel. Watch what Jesus does with his closest disciples as he tries to teach them what kingship in his kingdom actually looks like.

In Matthew 16, Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem and tells his disciples plainly that he is going there to die. *Peter rebukes him*: *Not so, Lord. This shall never happen to You* (Matthew 16:22). The disciples cannot fit *suffering king* and *Messiah* into the same picture. They are convinced this story ends with their tribe putting things back together politically.

Then comes the rich young ruler in Matthew 19. A young man with all the markers of social blessing comes to Jesus full of hope, asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, and walks away sorrowful when Jesus tells him to *sell what he has and give to the poor*. And Jesus says:

> Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:23–24)

Now, wealth here is more than money. Wealth can be a wealth of one's own *spirit*: pride, self-sufficiency, accomplishment. Anything we have that we refuse to release for God's kingdom is *that kind* of wealth. How hard is it for someone who has *anything* they hold tenaciously and refuse to let go of to enter the kingdom of heaven? Hard. The disciples ask the only honest question: *Who then can be saved?* And Jesus answers:

> "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

And then comes the moment where the pride of the disciples shows itself. Peter speaks up:

> "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matthew 19:27).

*What shall we have?* Feel the little pride welling up. Peter, a poor fisherman, has just watched a rich young man fail the test. Peter, by contrast, *has* left everything. By the standards of that day, the rich young man should have been the *blessed* one of God, wealth was supposed to be the evidence of divine favor. Peter was supposed to be the one God overlooked. And yet here Peter is, still following, and the rich young ruler is gone. *What's our reward?*

Jesus, beautifully, *does not crush him*. Notice the pattern. When Jesus encounters true seekers asking questions they don't fully understand (questions that show they still have *a little*

*Egypt in them*, a little of the world still in them) *the Lord is super patient*. He answers Peter's question generously:

> Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:28–29)
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> But then comes the line that turns everything:
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> "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30).

Some readers would stop with the *twelve thrones* line and walk away patting themselves on the back. *See? The privileged people. Congratulations, you've arrived.* But Jesus will not let them stop there. The very next sentence is the corrective. *Many who are first will be last.* If our pride imagines that we should be first, we will be last. And then Jesus tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard *as the illustration of that principle*.

**The Laborers in the Vineyard**

The owner of a vineyard goes out at dawn and hires laborers, agreeing with them for a denarius for the day's work. He goes out again at nine in the morning. Again at noon. Again at three in the afternoon. And again at the *eleventh hour*, the very end of the workday, and brings in more workers. To each of the later groups he says only, *I will give you what is right.*

When evening comes, he calls them in to be paid, and notice the order. *He starts with the last and works back to the first.* He gives the eleventh-hour workers a full denarius. A full day's wage for one hour of labor. The dawn-workers see this and assume they will receive

proportionally more. But the owner gives them what they agreed to: *a denarius*. The amount they had negotiated.

Now: if he had paid the first workers first and let them leave, *the whole point of the parable would have been missed*. The whole point is that those who come late receive *the same* graciousness as those who came at dawn. The owner, who in the parable represents Jesus himself, going out continually to bring laborers in (cf. Matthew 9:37–38, *pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers*), will not send anyone home with less than enough to sustain them. *When you come into the kingdom, whenever your eyes are opened, God gives you the full reward.*

And the dawn-workers complain:

"These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day" (Matthew 20:12).

Watch the response of the owner:

> But he answered one of them and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (Matthew 20:13–15)

Notice that word *friend*. In the whole Gospel of Matthew, Jesus or the master in a parable uses *friend* as a direct address only three times. *Every time, it is a moment when the master has done some great gracious act and the listener has responded with something less than gratitude.* The friend is being gently corrected, *I am doing you no wrong*. The complainers' own stinginess has caused them to project stinginess onto the master. *Is your eye evil because I am good?* They

are seeing scarcity where there is actually abundance. They are projecting their own grasping economy onto a master whose economy is grace.

And then Jesus closes the whole parable with the same line that opened it, this time as a *summary statement*:

"So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:16).

Any of the programmers in the room will recognize the structure. There is a *but* clause in 19:30, and a *so* clause in 20:16. The *so* indicates that the parable in between is *the summary of the entire argument*. The whole chain of logic is being concluded. *If you come in thinking you deserve something, if your pride is the engine, the kingdom does not run on that fuel.* It runs on grace. The grace is found in our response, but it is all God's grace from beginning to end.

**The Third Prediction and the Sons of Zebedee**

And then, just after this parable, Matthew gives us the *third* explicit prediction of Jesus' death. Listen:

> Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, "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, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again." (Matthew 20:17–19)

Three short verses, but they index the *entire rest of the book*. He will go up to Jerusalem. He will be rejected by the religious leaders. The religious leaders will hand him over to the Gentiles. The Gentiles will beat, flog, and crucify him. And on the third day he will rise. The remaining chapters of Matthew are nothing but the unspooling of this summary.

And here is what I want you to see. *Three times* in Matthew Jesus predicts his death: chapter 16, chapter 17, and chapter 20. *Three times*, immediately afterward, the disciples respond by trying to *climb*. Watch the pattern:

In Matthew 16, after the first prediction, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him: Not so, Lord! Jesus must drag him back down: Get behind Me, Satan . . . If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it (Matthew 16:23–25).

In Matthew 17, after the second prediction, the disciples come to Jesus a chapter later and ask, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:1). Jesus answers by calling a child to him: Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).

And now, in *Matthew 20*, after the third and most detailed prediction, the *mother* of James and John comes worshiping to Jesus with her sons in tow:

> Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 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." (Matthew 20:20–21)

There it is. *The third predicted-death-followed-by-an-attempt-to-climb*. Every single time Jesus says *I am going to Jerusalem to die*, the disciples respond by trying to bring him up out of it, or to climb up themselves. They cannot stop scrambling for the seats of honor.

And I love the dynamic with the mother: *Mom, go ask Him; He likes you better than us.* (James and John have apparently calculated that the request will be received more graciously if their mother delivers it.) But Jesus, with characteristic gentleness, replies directly to the sons:

> "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." 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." (Matthew 20:22–23)

"You do not know what you ask." They thought the cup was a cup of blessing, the celebration of victory. The cup they were actually being offered was the cup of *wrath* and the suffering of the cross. They had no concept yet that the *kingdom* Jesus was about to enter would be entered *through the cross*.

**Who Sat at His Right Hand and on His Left**

Now jump forward to Matthew 27, the very fulfillment of everything Jesus has been predicting. Watch:

"And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left" (Matthew 27:37–38).

*The King of the Jews.* Crowned with thorns. Throne: a Roman cross. And on his right hand and on his left, *at the very moment he comes into his kingdom*, are two robbers. If James and John had been granted what they asked for, to sit on the right and on the left when Jesus came into his kingdom, *that* is where they would have been. On crosses, one on each side of the dying King. *Right hand and left hand at the cross of Calvary.*

And where were James and John at that moment? *They had fled.* All their confidence that they would be in on the kingdom, all the certainty when they said *we are able*, had collapsed in the Garden of Gethsemane. They were heading for the hills.

History tells us, of course, that James eventually did drink the cup. He was one of the first martyrs in the book of Acts (Acts 12:2). John we have no record of martyrdom, but we have a record of his exile on Patmos. So in different forms, both of them eventually did drink the cup of Christ. The path of following him *does* turn out to be a path of humiliation in the world's eyes. *How can you be successful if you are humble? How can you be successful unless you are ambitious, seeking the highest seats on the right hand and on the left?* The kingdom answers: *those are not the questions of this kingdom*.

**"When Did We?"**

And when we come to Matthew 25, on the very last night of Jesus' life before his arrest, listen to the parable he tells. *The sheep and the goats.* Jesus says to the sheep:

> "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" (Matthew 25:34–39)

*Lord, when did we?* That is the answer that breaks my heart. *I want to be a "when-did-we?" Christian.* The sheep do not know they are sheep. They are not strategizing. They are not climbing. They were *just doing what servants do*. To them the idea that an extraordinary act would please the heart of their Lord is hard to get their minds around; *we were just being kind to*

*people who needed kindness*. They could not imagine that the King himself had been present in every face they served.

That is the disposition the kingdom is looking for. *When did we?* Not *what shall we receive?,* which is the Peter question, and which gets answered with the parable of the vineyard. The *when did we?* question gets answered with *inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

**It Shall Not Be so Among You**

So when Jesus' indignant ten hear what James and John have asked for, they come to him angry, but not because they have understood. They are angry because *the two brothers got there first*. The ten are indignant because they themselves had wanted the same thing. *They wanted to be the head and not the tail. They wanted the right hand and the left hand seats too.* Their anger is not righteous indignation; it is jealousy that they were beaten to the ask.

> And then comes one of the most important sentences in the entire Gospel:
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> 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. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."
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> (Matthew 20:25–28)

"*It shall not be so among you.*" The Greek for *lord it over* is the language of *domination*: *katakurieuō,* to exercise *kurios*-authority *down upon*. And *exercise authority* is the second of two words for top-down control: *katexousiazō*. Both verbs carry the *kata-* prefix, *down upon*. Jesus is naming the entire shape of how Gentile rulers operate: power *down upon*. And he says, *it shall*

*not be so among you*. The shape of leadership in this kingdom is *the opposite vector*. Not power down upon. Power *poured out under*.

*Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. Whoever desires to be first* (there is that word again, the first who become last) *let him be your slave*. And then the most important phrase: *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 shape of leadership in the kingdom is identical to the shape of the King. The King who came to serve, and to die, is the model for the manner of every leader who comes after him.

**The Innate Desire to Rule, Healed**

Now, *why* is this so hard? Why is it that in Matthew 16, Jesus says *upon this rock I will build My church* (Matthew 16:18), and just two chapters later, in Matthew 18, the leaders of that very church are *fighting about who is the greatest*? And two more chapters later, in Matthew 20, they are *still* fighting about it? And two thousand years later, the church *is still fighting about it*?

It goes all the way back. Genesis 1:26–28: God made man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion . . ." In us is something innate, a desire to *rule*. And in the garden, that desire was *good*. It was the desire to tend and keep, like a horticulturist managing a garden, like a herdsman caring for his flock: thoughtful, careful rulership over God's good creation.

But man did not want *that* kind of rule. By Genesis 6, *the earth was filled with violence* (Genesis 6:11). Cain killed Abel. Lamech escalated: *if Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold* (Genesis 4:24). Always more. Always escalating. Man wanted to dominate man. And then Babel:

"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

They rejected the original command, *be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*, and decided instead to centralize and *make a name for themselves*. They wanted to build the name upward. And the writer of Genesis describes God *coming down* to see this tower, and the picture is almost playful. The tower they thought was reaching to heaven required God *to stoop down very low to see what these little men were doing*. The Hebrew has a sly tone there. (The Jewish writers are funny people; they understand the absurdity of the project from the inside.) *God peered down and squinted*, and the tower fell flat in his vision.

And then in the very next chapter, God turns the *name* project upside down:

"I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2).

*I will make you a name.* The thing humanity could not manage to manufacture by stacking bricks upward, God simply *gives*, to a barren old man and his barren old wife in Mesopotamia, when they leave home in obedience. We do not have to climb. *God will be the promoter of our lives.* That has been the offer since Abraham.

**The Picture They Will Have**

So look at where we land. Jesus has been bringing his disciples down for four chapters. I'm going to Jerusalem to die. Take up your cross and follow me. Become like a little child. Become a servant. Become a slave. Be like the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve. Down. Down. Down. Every time they try to climb, he gently brings them back. It shall not be so among you.

And here is the question that comes out of all of this. *Do you think people would still be rejecting the kingdom of God if his people were actually serving one another in love?* If we were what Jesus actually called us to be (humble, lacking the ambition characteristic of humanity, becoming the kind of servants who can say *when did we?*) would people still be rejecting the church the way they reject it now? Or are they rejecting *another domination system masquerading as the kingdom*?

People are tired of being dominated. They are tired of power systems. And what God is asking us through his Son is *to be like God*, to come down. To serve one another in love. To be the picture of God that resists every domination instinct in our own hearts. *Our private actions and our private devotion to God* have to be powerful enough, unstoppable enough, that the people who encounter us cannot conjure up the false image of God they have been carrying. *Instead, the picture conjured in their minds will be a picture of love and devotion and service and sacrifice, gentleness of spirit, one who condescends to people of low estate.*

Be that kind of people. You see your calling, brethren:

> For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty. (1 Corinthians 1:26–27)

And do not forget where we were cut from. Isaiah says, Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you (Isaiah 51:1–2). Barren Abraham. Barren Sarah. *That* is the rock we were cut from. Let God make us a *name* the way he made *them* a name. Let God be our

fruitfulness. Let our lives not be the fruit of our own striving but the fruit of God's grace working in us for the sake of others.

It shall not be so among you. The cross is the shape of the kingdom. The cup is the cup we drink. The first are last. The last are first. And the King who came not to be served but to serve has shown us, in his own body, the only manner of greatness this kingdom will recognize.