

**Paradox** (Mat 20:17-28)

\* Our society can be imagined as a pyramid where the working class or servants are at its base; then, the middle class or semi-servants are at its central section; and the upper class or lords are at its top. Accordingly the kingdom of God can also be imagined like a social pyramid, but it is quite different abstraction. Here it is. At a pyramid's base there are people whose names were written in the Book of life; at its central section are those who were circumcised in heart like David, the man after God's own heart; and at the top of the pyramid are the elect servants while at its apex is the Chief Servant. Having this imagery before our eyes the two constructions, earthly and heavenly, may help us realize the fundamental difference between the two realms on the matter of their values. Thinking over a common wish for a better life, we recall the well-known American dream. It seems to be a person of the middleclass who has become independently wealthy and has equality with the upper class. Contrary to the American ideal, the Christian one is a person who has achieved poverty in spirit and equality with the humble servant that was preached by Jesus on the Mountain.

\* The ambiguity and paradoxical nature of God's kingdom was disclosed in Jesus' teaching of this kingdom. You may guess that the gospel lesson for today (Mat 20:17-28) is all about it. On hearing our lesson, we discerned a couple of diametrical perceptions regarding the idea of how to achieve a higher place in the heavenly society. Here we have two viewpoints, one belongs to the secular mind and another to the mind born from the Spirit. At this moment we address ourselves to the teaching of achievement providing the obvious distinction between the wrong and right means of achievement.

\* We start from some illustrations. First, Luke chapter 14 narrates an episode from Jesus' life. Once he was invited to a party hosted by a chief Pharisee. Traditionally the influential guests were asked to take the reclining places at the left and right sides of a host, those seats considered as *the seats of honor*. Jesus noted that some people tried to take the better seats that actually were prepared for more influential guests. The old wish to achieve the higher rank in a social scale permanently rules over hearts and minds of many including the people of our society. Today we like to focus not on the moral aspects of the event but on the means by which people tried to achieve the better position on the societal scale, likewise the people of that banquet who resorted to self-promotion to reach a goal. They hurried to take the better seats, by this they hoped to be seen as the big frogs in a small pond.

\* Another illustration comes from our Sunday text, (Mat 20:17-28). It says that the mother of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, respectfully asked Jesus for a favor. She requested the exceptional position in the Kingdom of God for her two sons - probably because of her close family relationship with Jesus' mother Mary.

In addition, she might take into consideration a fact that James and John were Jesus' favorite disciples.

In the (vv.20,21) we read, *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. And Jesus 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."* In this instance the mother of the two favorite disciples tried to achieve the highest position for her sons due to family ties and her sons' celebrity. In summary, the self-promotion, family ties, and celebrity were classified as the means by which people achieve their goals.

\* There are some other common means in view that are worthy to be mentioned. In some cultures, for instance, people in order to get a higher position, in addition to being ambitious, smart, energetic, intelligent etc, also have to build personal relations with those in authority. In this case, giving a bribe is the significant issue. Besides, in order to become important a person has to already be important. One man wrote on this matter, *If no one has even heard of you until today, you will be laughed out the door. "Get lost, kid," that is all you will be told. "Come back in thirty years!* All of these instances speak of the ambitious-smart-energetic people who resort to self-promotion, family ties, bribes, and their celebrity.

\* Significantly, the four secular methods of achievement listed above are useless regarding the kingdom of God. *You do not know what you are asking* said Jesus to the mother of James and John in return for her request, (v.22).

Instead of family ties and celebrity, Jesus had offered an unknown means of achievement - the cup he was about to drink and to be baptized with was the baptism he had. Friends, are we able to drink the cup that Jesus drank? Please, don't hurry to say, *Yes, we are able*. Apparently, Jesus' cup is not what we use to drink in the Lord's Supper. His Cup in figurative language is his lot in the ministry of mankind's salvation, namely the persecution, betrayal, dislikes, insults, harsh life, lack of comfort and so forth. Next question, are we able to be baptized with the baptism with which Jesus was baptized? Again, don't hurry to give an answer. Jesus' and our baptism are not the same. Our baptism is only a likeness of death while Jesus' baptism is what he said, *See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day,* (vv.18,19).

\* The Acts of Apostles and tradition confirm Jesus' words as he said to James and John, *You shall drink indeed of my cup,.... And be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with,* (v.23). Besides being persecuted for Christ's sake, the apostles endured martyrdom. James was bathed in his own blood, when killed with the sword by Herod; as for John, he also suffered an execution,

it says that he was cast into a vessel of boiling oil; however it didn't harm him to death because John was exception. Jesus' Cup and baptism are the two means of achievement by which James and John attained their seats of honor. We are not certain, if the brothers were granted to sit at the right and left sides of Jesus or if they were not. But about one thing we are certain and that is the prophecy of what they should suffer for Christ was fulfilled and, the apostles entered into Christ's glory prepared for them by the Father.

\* But how about us, will we achieve the high position in the Kingdom or will the middle class be good enough? Jesus has not left us without an answer. My dear friends, he says, *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, (vv.26,27).* In this instance, we may say, Yes, with the help of God we are able to serve the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Friends, Jesus and his apostles left us with the examples of brotherly love that exceed over our carnal desires and selfishness. Beloved, help each other by words and deeds and you will attain the good position in the Kingdom.

\* Finally we brought the teaching of methodology of achievement to a successful conclusion. The listeners who dream to achieve wealth freedom and equality, at least in the middle class in the US, were taught the four means of achievements. However, not all of them are acceptable for Christians. But regarding the Kingdom of God, we've learned the 3 means of achievements with all of them acceptable. They are endurance of the persecutions and even death for Christ's sake. The last is love; by means of love we can achieve the highest rank in the Kingdom of God and be rewarded with the seats of honor as well with righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit even today. Isn't it a paradox that the last will be first, and the first last, (v.16). The King of all glory, the Master of all ages, *did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, (v.28).*

Beloved, may the Lord grant us the glorious crowns and sit us in one company with all saints in his kingdom.

Amen