Today, the message is about prayer. Prayer is one of the foundational and central practices of the Christian church.

By definition, prayer is “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship.”

What is prayer to you? Have you ever asked yourself if your prayers are being heard or if you are praying the right way?

Many would agree that prayer is talking with God. Not that complicated. Like a person-to-person phone call. Prayer also involves intercession, meaning, praying for the needs of other people. Others may also say that prayer is asking God what we need, which is correct too. Jesus said, “And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith.” Matthew 21:22

However, prayer is much more than just talking, interceding, and asking. Prayer can accomplish so much more in our lives if we have a deeper understanding of it.

Here is a text that spoke to me and made me realized about this reality of prayer. This is Matthew 20:20-23,

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, **“What do you want?”** She said to him, **“Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”** But Jesus answered, **“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”** They said to him, **“We are able.”** He said to them, **“You will indeed drink my cup**, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

This Scripture of Matthew is the story of a mother who wanted only the best for her sons (James and John), who were part of the twelve disciples of Jesus. She came to Jesus one day with an audacious request. She asked that when Jesus comes with his Kingdom, he would have one of her sons seated on his right and the other seated on his left. She wanted her sons to have the places of highest honor, the top places in Jesus’ kingdom.

From our perspective, we may be tempted to criticize this woman, but in reality, she was doing what any mother would do. All she wanted was for her children to be taken care of.

If you read the other gospels, it’s clear that this was a recurring controversy among the disciples all the way until the Lord’s Supper in the Upper Room the night before Jesus was crucified. No matter what we may think about James and John (and their mother), the other disciples wanted those seats as well.

The fundamental problem is that this mother and her sons underestimated the cost of following Christ and they overestimated their own importance. They didn’t ask for work in the coming Kingdom (which would have been a nobler request). They asked only for a place of honor. They were asking for a seat. It appears they were not pursuing the purposes of the kingdom but the benefits of the kingdom. They asked for a royal chair.

To this request, Jesus provides an answer. He says,

“You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? And they replied, “Yes, we can.” And Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” (22-23).

Notice that Jesus doesn’t rebuke the mother or her sons. And he doesn’t deny his coming Kingdom or that there will be seats of honor. So, leaving aside selfish motives for a moment, there is nothing wrong with the request. Jesus simply tells them that they don’t know what they are asking for. Then he asks the men if they can drink the cup he is about to drink, and with surprising determination, they replied, “We can.”

Now, why would Jesus ask about “the cup”? There is a very insightful reason for this, and it is going to lead us to our main point in this message.

The concept of “drinking the cup” in the Bible speaks of an intensely personal experience. It refers to the moment when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed that the cup he was about to drink might be taken from him. Luke 22:42 says of this, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

That “cup” for Jesus particularly meant the suffering and death on a cross. His drinking of the cup as he said “not my will but yours be done” demonstrated his willingness to accomplish the greater purpose of God even if represented a challenge for him. And he did, he drank his cup for he trusted that the Father’s desire would result in the greatest good for all people.

The question for us is: **What is our cup?** When Jesus asked James and John “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” he was telling them -and us- that his cup represents the submission to the will of God and the purposes of God’s kingdom. In this sense, the cup is something taken voluntarily having as a goal not a personal gain but accomplishing God’s will. **Drinking the cup is the ultimate act of obedience and trust to God.**

You may be asking, what does this have to do with prayer? Well, I said all this to get to this point, which is quite simple: **when we pray, are we asking for a seat or drinking the cup?** **When we pray, are our primary concerns our comforts, or are we pursuing the kingdom of God?** Of course, Jesus does invite us to ask for whatever we may think we need. The point I am making here is not to stop that but to go beyond that seeking the will of God for our lives.

Jesus spoke of this when he said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Matthew 6:33

If we look closely, **all this time Jesus has been telling us that prayer is not a mean for personal gain (a “seat of honor”) but a source of life.** Prayer is the cup that moves us through our wants and needs into a new living.

When we tell God, “all these are my wants, but let it be your will and not mine” we are basically saying, **“I want that seat, but that is not the most important thing; above everything else, I want to please you and accomplish you will.”**

**My friends, this the cup Jesus was talking about, this is praying the right way.**

When we pray like this, we are transformed, our thoughts change, our attitudes change, the way we talk and treat people changes. It is at this point that we begin to have glimpses of true joy and contentment. Our concerns are not anymore about what we have but who we are. And, paradoxically, when we become less attached to stuff many times is when we have more of everything.

Also, when we pray like this, we see with more clarity the path before us. We get a new sense of direction, vision, and purpose for our lives. We learned new wisdom to make proper and better choices for our families and us.

And, when we pray like this, drinking the cup of “let it be your will and not mine,” we are empowered to accomplish everything set before us. We gain confidence, trust, and bravery to face any challenges before us. We no longer rely on what we have but in whom we are trusting. **Our confidence does not come from the chair we are sitting on but from the one that sustains us.** This is true power.

In closing, the secret to a powerful prayer life is humbleness and submission to God’s teachings. It is not about not asking what we want or pretending that we don’t want it by forcing artificial piety; but it is about not losing sight of what matters most, even as we struggle with our own priorities.

May we all drink the cup of obedience to the teachings of Jesus. May we all serve the purposes of God’s kingdom. And, may all of God’s plans for us be successful. Amen.