

“Wires Crossed” (Cross Roads Week 5)  
(Matt. 20:20-28)

- **Ego Check**

- Have you ever been *humbled*? That’s a good conversation starter right there—you’re guaranteed to get a good story. It’s usually something we try to forget! I was about 22, fresh out of college, diving into my first year of ministry as an associate pastor at a vibrant church. I led the youth ministry with a team and we were on a retreat. They had lined up a great speaker to give the messages. He was a gifted leader. I looked up to him as a young pastor trying to find my way. We had a chance to eat lunch together in the dining hall. He was asking about my church. Frankly, I was pretty insecure, struggling to figure out how to carry this weight of being a pastor. And as I shared with him what I did, I found myself, without even meaning to, kind of *bragging* about our church and the ministry I led—I guess I was trying to justify myself, or something? (*You know, here’s how big our group is, and here’s what we’re trying to do at our youth center, and here’s my grand vision, blah blah blah...*) But right in the middle of my speech, one of our youth volunteers—we’ll call him “Brody”—just sat down at our table and inserted himself in the conversation! I love Brody. He was one of our most dedicated youth workers. But Brody was *raw*. He was new to youth ministry, had recently recommitted his life to Christ, had a *past*, wore his heart on his sleeve. Brody could be a *bull in a china shop*. Anyway, he just shamelessly interrupted my soliloquy about how great my youth ministry was. Right in front of the retreat speaker, Brody goes: “*Pastor David. I’ve been wanting to talk to you. You know, a lot of the kids at the youth center, they don’t know how to relate to you. You just walk around looking all perfect, talking about God, and they think your kinda fake. I just wanted you to know. Maybe we can talk sometime and I can help you learn how to, you know, relate to them. Alright, good chat, thanks for letting me interrupt your conversation, enjoy your lunch guys.*” And he walked away! I have no idea what motivated Brody to do that—but as I look back, I think God in His great mercy planted Brody in that exact moment to be His divine messenger to pop my fragile ego. I never recovered the conversation, we just awkwardly finished our lunch and parted ways.
- Man oh man, how it *hurts* to get your ego checked when you’re flying high. Today on this **Cross Roads** journey of Lent, we’re talking about when we get our “**Wires Crossed**” as disciples—when our *egos* get in the way of following Jesus. We’re looking at what *true humility* looks like, at *Godly ambition* versus unholy ambition, and at *lasting fruit* versus personal achievement. Matthew’s Gospel has a *painfully good* story of the disciples’ egos colliding with Jesus’ humility that will guide us through these themes today. *First, let’s pray.*

- **Wires Crossed**

- Open up to Matt. 20:20-28. Many of us have heard this story—it’s so *cringeworthy*, and also so relatable. Here’s what happened according to Matthew: ***Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” (Matt. 20:2-21)*** Leave it to mom. *Leave it to mom.* I don’t think anything but the pride and love of a momma could give someone the boldness to approach *the King of kings* with a request like that! There’s a Yiddish word for “**gushing over your kids that’s just perfect: “Kvelling.”**” Momma Zebedee is *kvelling* over her sons. James and John, the sons of Zebedee the fisherman. These guys made themselves quite a reputation in the Gospels. We often give Peter a hard time for his brazen attitude, but I think these boys could give Peter a run for his money!
- Here’s their Mom, looking out for her boys. You know, they gave up a lot: these boys should’ve taken over the family fishing business. Their father worked hard to raise them for that, but when Jesus walked by, they left everything for Him. And their father didn’t say anything, he didn’t argue or try to stop them, he let them follow Jesus. So now that they’ve followed Jesus for some time, and He’s getting close His big entrance in Jerusalem, mom and the boys think this is their moment to get the inside track. Mom says, “*Give me your word that these two sons of mine will*

*be awarded the highest places of honor in your kingdom, one at your right hand, and one at your left hand.”*

- You know, there’s more than one way to miss the mark. We can do the right things, for the wrong motives (and I guess sometimes the wrong thing for the right motives). We can have great faith, but still use that faith to make it about *ourselves*. Momma Zebedee, James and John, they had great faith! Many people couldn’t fathom that this nobody carpenter from Nazareth was really *the Messiah*, the *Son of God*. But look at the faith mom show: she *knows* she’s talking to the King, she *knows* He has the authority, she *knows* He taught us *ask and you will receive!* So, she asks the unthinkable—that’s a crazy level of faith and boldness, if you ask me. And I think maybe that’s why Jesus’ response is a bit gentler than you’d expect for such a seemingly egotistical request. I mean, the disciples are madder than Jesus here. Maybe He smiles a little bit at the boldness of their faith, and the zeal of this Jewish mom. But it is misdirected, and they’re missing the point. So, He hits them hard with truth:
- **“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. 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.” (20:22-23)** *Little children, you don’t know what you’re saying. You misunderstand the King you are speaking to and the nature of His Kingdom. Can you really drink this cup?*
- What cup is He talking about? A few chapters later, He prays in the Garden, *Father, if it’s possible, take this cup from me*. The cup of this King is *the cup of suffering*. You know, James went on to be the first Apostle to be martyred. And on the other end, his brother John was the *last* of the Apostles to die—which would be its own kind of suffering, going on living while all your friends lost their lives as martyrs. At one point, John was sentenced by the emperor Domitian to be *boiled alive*, yet he miraculously survived it, and went on to spend his final days isolated in exile. *Do you really want to be that kind of greatness, sons of Thunder?*
- Naturally, the disciples are *ticked* when they catch wind of this. Were they mad because of how inappropriate the question was? Or because they didn’t get to ask Jesus the question first?
- **When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (20:24-28)** You just need a quick look at the rulers of Jesus’ day to know what he’s talking about: Emperors Augustus and Tiberius, the Herods. Throughout the history of the world, it’s been normal for powerful people to *use, and abuse, others*. And it’s not just the most powerful people. How many of us, in our roles of influence, our responsibilities, have allowed pride and fear to cause us to hurt the very people we’re supposed to protect, to wound the ones we love most? We all have this thing called *sin*, we all have this thing called *pride*. We all have a broken ego, trying to prove our worth and protect our image.
- Then there’s Jesus, *the most powerful person ever*. He comes and says, *Whoever wants to be great, to be first, must become a servant of all. Even the Son of Man didn’t come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life up as a ransom for the lost*. What kind of King is this? What kind of a leader is this? For Jesus, true power is not demonstrated by what you do *with* others, but what you do *for* them. It’s not having the ability to tell others what to do, it’s having the responsibility to give your life away in love. That’s how God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, exercises power. God exercises power for the sake of others through Self-Giving love, which is perfectly modeled in the life of Christ.
- **Achievement vs. Fruit**
- Our pride and ego can be so *sneaky*. We can do all the right things, and still have our wires crossed, our motives mixed. We’re loving God, we’re serving God, but somewhere deep down, *it’s for the love of ourselves, to prove something, to measure up*. And Jesus says, *that’s not the*

way. Follow me, stand at the Cross Roads and ask for the Good Way. Lay down your life, and you'll find it, be the servant of all, and your life will be great in the sight of Heaven. Jesus said, **"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: love each other."** (John 15:16-17)

- You know, there's *false humility* and there's *true humility*. False humility is thinking less of yourself—you know, we play this game of self-deprecation but it's often veiled pride, trying to make ourselves look good. True humility is thinking of yourself less; it's self-forgetfulness, because you're focusing on God's love.
- There's *worldly ambition* and there's *godly ambition*. Worldly ambition focuses on bolstering your image, proving your worth, serving yourself. *Godly ambition* focuses on *magnifying His Name*, serving *His agenda*, making much of *others*.
- Jon Tyson writes about the difference between *Success* and *Fruit*. **"Achievement... Measured by visible outcomes, metrics and results; produces recognition, status, distinction, awards, reputation; driven by accomplishment, performance and productivity; often triggers comparison and envy; rooted in control, effort and self-assertion; depends heavily on external validation; can inflate identity, giving a sense of worth tied to performance; can become addictive, creating a cycle of needing more to feel enough; often masks inner-poverty, while projecting outer strength; fades quickly, requiring constant renewal to sustain meaning."** Wow, that kind of hurts. Meanwhile, there's what Jesus calls us to: *fruitfulness*. **"Fruit... Measured by its effect on others over time, not by what was accomplished in the moment; produces life in other people (joy, peace, growth, healing), not just admiration; is relational at its core, blessing the community rather than elevating the individual; often unseen and difficult to quantify; flows out of character, especially graciousness, generosity and kindness; reduces envy and restlessness in others, inviting us to abide, not compare; is rooted in surrender, not control; comes from a life yielded rather than managing outcomes; endures beyond the moment and has lingering impact; is not dependent on recognition or attention; becomes clearer with time, often being most visible after we die."**
- We discover this life as we walk the Cross Roads on the Way of Jesus. Our validation comes from the perfect love of God, and we focus less on proving our worth, and more on loving God and serving others. We carry our towel, just like our master, Jesus.
- I have this sneaking suspicion that at the end of my life, when I go up for my final review with the Master in His Glory, He's not going to highlight the things I thought were so important, things I got so busy and worked up for, times I tried to be the hero, moments I thought looked like greatness. He's going to show me things I forgot about, moments where grace led to hidden acts of love and sacrifice, things I thought didn't matter. Moments I forgot about myself. At least, that's what I hope He finds. What about you? What are you living for? Wouldn't you like to know the freedom of living with true humility and love, like Jesus did?
- Don't live with your wires crossed. Don't live for your ego. Follow Jesus. Serve like Him. Love like Him. Make yourself small, make much of others, and your life will become a great witness of His great goodness. And if you ever get your wires crossed, pray that God sends someone to humble you that day. (You'll thank them later.)