Question:

In Matthew 20:20–25, the mother of Zebedee’s sons approaches Jesus and asks that her two sons be granted the privilege of sitting at His right and left hand in His kingdom. Jesus responds that He does not have the authority to grant these positions. However, in Luke 23:39–43, Jesus promises the repentant thief on the cross, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” How do we understand these passages together? Does this mean Scripture contradicts itself?

Careful Examination of Scripture

In Matthew 20:20–23 (NKJV):

> 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 want?’ 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.’ But Jesus answered and said, ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ So He said to them, ‘You will indeed drink My cup,

> 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.

Here, Jesus clarifies that the authority to assign the highest places of honor in the kingdom belongs to the Father. This aligns with John 5:22, which states that the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son, but the Father also has the final authority over the distribution of glory and honor.

In contrast, in Luke 23:39–43 (NKJV), the repentant thief says:

> “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”
>
> Jesus replies,
>
> “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

This exchange shows Jesus exercising His authority to forgive sins and grant salvation instantly to one who sincerely repents. The

thief’s request is not for status, but for admission into eternal life.

Theological Explanation

1. Authority to Grant Salvation vs. Authority to Distribute Rewards

Jesus has full authority to grant salvation to those who repent and believe in Him (cf. John 10:27–30). Salvation is by grace through faith, not by works or merit (Ephesians 2:8–9). The thief on the cross exemplifies this truth—he received salvation solely by faith in Christ’s mercy, not by righteous works.

2. Rewards in the Kingdom Are Based on Faithfulness and Service

The request of Zebedee’s sons is about receiving positions of honor in the kingdom, which depends on one’s faithfulness and endurance in the Christian life (cf. 2 Timothy 2:12, “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him”). Jesus’ answer teaches that rewards will be given according to the Father’s will and the believer’s obedience. This also reflects the principle in Romans 14:10–12 that believers will give an account for their works.

3. The Nature of the “Cup” Jesus Refers To

When Jesus asks if they can drink the cup He is about to drink, He refers to His suffering and sacrificial death (cf. Mark 10:38–39). The sons of Zebedee affirm their willingness to suffer, but Jesus indicates that sharing in His suffering is a prerequisite for sharing His glory, yet the final appointment to honor is up to God the Father.

4. The Immediate Assurance to the Repentant Thief

Jesus’ promise to the thief demonstrates His sovereign authority to grant eternal life immediately upon genuine repentance. This confirms the biblical teaching that salvation is available even at the last moment of life (cf. Philippians 1:23, Paul’s desire “to depart and be with Christ”).

Application and Reflection

Salvation Is the First Priority: Entering the kingdom by faith in Jesus Christ is the essential step. The thief’s humble faith secured his place with Jesus immediately.

Rewards Will Be Judged at Christ’s Return: Positions of honor are granted according to God’s perfect judgment of one’s faithfulness and works (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Watchfulness and Faithfulness: Jesus warns against complacency and hypocrisy (cf. Revelation 3:14–16)—living a double life leads to rejection, but persevering in faith leads to reward.

Are You Ready?

Do you know Jesus as your Savior? Are you living in humble obedience, trusting His grace daily?

May God richly bless you as you seek Him earnestly, trusting in His grace and walking in His truth.

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