



True Greatness

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 20:17-28

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What makes someone great? What makes up true greatness? That is the question that I am not sure we even know how to answer anymore. Greatness is an accolade that is thrown about quite loosely in our society and as a result has lost any real meaning. We associate greatness with position and power, with wealth and possession, with athletic accomplishments and physical prowess, with academic achievements, with those who make scientific discoveries or technological advancements. We associate greatness with extreme accomplishments like climbing a mountain or some military conquest. In this underachieving, self-obsessed, overexposed society in which we live, having a Youtube video that goes viral is a mark of “greatness”. But are any of these things true greatness? Would God regard them as “great”? Greatness is one of those words like “love” that we have redefined so much as to make it worthless. What is true greatness? How is it defined? Greatness was something that the disciples were desperate to understand and acquire for themselves, right? We saw that in the last couple of chapters that we have looked at in Matthew. Who is the greatest in the kingdom? We gave up all for you, what will we have? These are the things that have filled the disciples’ minds – these men whom Jesus is molding and preparing for the ministry of the gospel. So In this text, Jesus is again going to talk to His disciples, and therefore to us, about what true greatness really is. And His discussion of greatness will be bracketed on either end by a reminder of the cross that is looming over Jesus.

Think about the context of what we are looking at this morning. Jesus has just been describing to His disciples the nature of Divine grace -- the sovereignty and majesty of God’s favor, the vastness of His generosity and mercy toward His people, grace not earned or deserved but bountifully given. To these guys who have been concerned about greatness and reward, Jesus has been talking about grace – reorienting their perceptions and understandings of God’s kingdom. They need to understand that the only reason that they can be the recipients of God’s grace and be received by God is because, for their sake, the only One who is truly great will be crucified.

True Greatness Will Be Crucified (v. 17-19) Picking it up in verse 17 we read: “And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “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.”” (Matthew 20:17–19, ESV) Here is now the third time that Jesus has spoken openly of what awaits Him in Jerusalem, the reason for which He took on human flesh and was born. Taking His disciples aside, away from the crowds that were always following them, Jesus reminds His disciples of what He is going to Jerusalem to do. He is going to die. From the beginning Matthew told us that Jesus would save His people from their sins. From the beginning Jesus knew how that would be accomplished. He knew He must suffer, be slain, and rise again from the dead.

This is the most detailed description of His coming death that Jesus has given yet. It’s the first time that Jesus explicitly says that He is going to be crucified. This will be no glorious martyrdom but the worst and most humiliating of death, brutal and ugly.

The words that Jesus uses point to the truth that He will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, be formally condemned in the Jewish court to death – fully rejected by the nation as her king, turned over to the Romans to be humiliated and mocked, to be physically beaten and scourged with the whip, and put to death on the cross. He will be condemned, humiliated, brutalized, and crucified – but in three days be vindicated by His resurrection from the dead.

Jesus knows what it takes to bring sinners into the kingdom. It cost Him greatly, far beyond our ability to truly comprehend, in order to come and seek us and save us. If there had been any other way, He would have taken it. Because we could not save ourselves from our sins, Christ came and did just that and it was costly – the crucifixion ordained by God the Father and carried out by sinful men.

This is how it had to be. If sin and death were to be conquered, it would be through the glorious work of the cross and if the Kingdom were to be established by His blood and populated, it would be by those for whom He died. No kingdom citizenship, no rescue, no redemption, no eternal life apart from the satisfaction of God’s eternal justice through the death of Christ for sinners on the cross and the declaration of God the Father’s perfect approval

of the death of His Son through the resurrection to secure our salvation. Abundant grace poured out upon us is the result of true greatness humbling Himself, pouring and emptying Himself out, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is the way that Jesus would display His divine greatness – the laying down of his life, the humiliation of the cross, the agonizing death. In His humility, His servant heart and willingness to die, Christ, in the words of Peter in 1 Peter 3:18: “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,” (1 Peter 3:18, ESV) And that He would do so richly displays the truth of His greatness.

But, here is the thing, it seems that no matter how many times Jesus would have spoken of the his coming passion, spoken of His coming death and resurrection by which He would redeem His people, destroy the power of sin and death, and inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven, the disciples would never have understood. We see that in the way that so closely on the heels of Christ’s reminder to them of the passion that awaits him in Jerusalem, comes

A Faith-filled But Foolish Request (v. 20-21) Look, starting in verse 20: “Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”” (Matthew 20:20–21, ESV) Almost as if they never heard Jesus’ words about the cross, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, the mother of James and John, comes up to Jesus, boys in tow to make a request of him. This whole scene is so embarrassing, isn’t it? It is hard to even read. Two grown men and mommy interceding for them with Jesus to get them the good spots. “Now Jesus, you be nice to my boys here. They deserve it.” You would have expected them to be like “Maaahhhhm! Stop it!” But they don’t, and the reason they don’t is because they are in on it. Apparently, the boys and their mom have been talking. Having heard Jesus mention some thrones to Peter back in verse 28 of chapter 19, they have been talking about how to get the choicest positions in the kingdom, how they might sit on the right or left hand of Christ. They believe Jesus’ words that they will sit on thrones in the new world, and so that is why I said that they are asking out of faith – but the foolishness of their request is what stands out.

Had they not been listening? Obviously James and John did not clearly understand the way in which the kingdom would come, the manner in which Christ would display His glory. They were considering the kingdom in terms of splendor and earthly majesty. Jesus would reign, they thought, over a realm a lot like the Romans, only much more glorious. To the disciples, just as it would be to us, a kingdom meant pomp and power, might and grandeur. They assumed that Christ would take the throne in Jerusalem – despite Jesus’ repeated references to His death -- and they were vying to see who would sit closest to the king, who would have the most honor, who would have the greatest influence. They wanted the honor of helping Him bring in the kingdom. They did not realize, refused to realize, that the coming of the kingdom meant crucifixion – demanded crucifixion – lowliness, rejection and sacrifice for Christ. Who would seek for the honor in that kingdom that they were demanding? Who could if they understood what it meant?

This request is monumentally foolish, thoughtless, crass, and ignorant and Jesus makes that very clear as he addresses, not the mother, but the sons of Zebedee – James and John – very directly. Jesus asks a pointed question, receives a presumptuous reply, makes a painful promise and declares God’s preference. Look at it.

Pointed Question, Presumptuous Reply, Painful Promise, God’s Preference (v.22-24) Pick it up in verse 22: “Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.”” (Matthew 20:22, ESV) They had no idea of what they were speaking. How could they help bring in the kingdom? How could they do what only Christ could do? Were they able to drink the cup that Christ was about to drink? No, and that is the point. They could not endure the cup the Jesus was about to drink upon the cross -- the cup of God’s wrath, poured out on sinners, the cup that will be poured out on those who are unrighteous, Jew and Gentile, the “cup” which was foretold in the Old Testament, and which is still prophesied in the Book of Revelation, the cup of the wrath of God. The cup that Jesus had to drink was the full measure of the suffering God had set forth as the payment for the sins of His people. These sufferings had been assigned to Jesus, sufferings which would culminate in the cross. The cross was not simply an act of injustice on the part of men, it was the divine requirement of God for Jesus to inaugurate and to fill His kingdom. Jesus Christ suffered in the place of the people given to Him of His Father. And He suffered what they deserved. It was God's Son in our flesh, standing in the place of God's elect, standing in the place of what we deserved as sinners who had broken His law. The cup that Christ drank was filled with the fury of God's holy wrath against our sins, the measure of suffering owed to us who have sinned against the God of heaven. And to receive that cup meant for Christ that He

must assume our place before God's justice, and answer in His own body the demand of God's Law upon the cross by enduring the burning and holy vengeance of the wrath owed against our sins. Without the suffering of the cross - "the cup" - there would be no kingdom for us but the kingdom of darkness. That's why Paul could rejoice in the cross of Christ by declaring, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:13–14, ESV) In that greater sense, there was no way that the disciples could drink of Christ's cup.

Hastily and with no real realization of what it takes, they respond they certainly are able to drink the cup prepared by the Father for Christ. But at this point, neither of them has any idea what salvation's work would require of Christ, the cup He would have to drink. They speak out of ambition and ignorance.

So Jesus makes clear to them that their request is foolishness, but then He tells them this truth. "He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."" (Matthew 20:23, ESV) As His disciples, James and John would taste of His cup – not the fullness of it, of course – but they would know suffering in their calling as Apostles of the kingdom and preachers of the gospel. James became the first of the disciples to be martyred. Herod put him to death. John died as an exile on Patmos. Every Christian to one degree or another must drink the cup of suffering, affliction, and trial to one degree or another. And these men would spend their lives suffering for the Lord Jesus Christ but the cup that Christ had to drink – that was not theirs to drink, was not something they could drink. Still, Jesus tells them clearly that who would sit at his right and hand and at his left -- that was prepared by the Father and was not His to grant. Well, the other disciples overheard all that was going on and Matthew records:

"And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers." (Matthew 20:24, ESV) Predictably, the other disciples were angry at James and John. They were offended not because of the nature of what they asked. They were not upset for Jesus, but because James and John got the drop on the rest of them. If they had thought of it, they would have asked the same exact thing. So it is in the midst of this striving amongst the disciples that Jesus describes the nature of

True Greatness (v. 25-28) “But Jesus called them to him and said, “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, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”” (Matthew 20:25–28, ESV) Jesus wants to put their striving and straining for prominence to an end. Enough of the jockeying for position already. I cannot imagine how wearying this must have been for Jesus, how disappointing, the disciples always striving for prominence. Jesus takes the opportunity to teach these men what true greatness, greatness according to God, greatness in the kingdom of heaven, is all about. It is as if Jesus is saying, “Enough of this already, guys. Let me explain this to you as clearly as I can. You’re acting like worldlings. Greatness has nothing to do with what you are thinking.” First, He explains to them what they already know, what they are familiar with. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, they exercise authority in very obvious kinds of ways as demonstrations of their supposed greatness. But Jesus insists that there be a clear contrast between kingdom citizens and the world.

Jesus tells them that if they are after true greatness then they must emulate Him. Listen to these words again: But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. Those are strong, definite, powerful words. This is the way of true greatness – humbling yourself and serving other people, being a slave to your brothers and sisters in Christ, laying down your rights to yourself and seeking for their well-being, out of sincerity and not with a desire to be honored as a servant. William Law wrote in his book, *A Serious Call to A Devout and Holy Life*, these words: "Let every day be a day of humility. Condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow creatures. Cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassion at their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be a servant of servants and condescend to do the lowliest offices of the lowest of mankind." If you would be great, look for ways to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ, look for ways to serve Christ by serving His bride. Lay down your life, be a living sacrifice, spend and be spent, pour yourself out for others, wash each others’ feet. That is true greatness. One of the clearest measures of whether or not we have authentic faith is whether or not we are servants – not the words that we speak, the truths we affirm, the Scripture we can quote, the Spiritual arguments we can make, the standard of righteousness to which we ascribe. True greatness is measured by the servant heart we possess – not being served, but serving...serving our brothers and sisters in Christ, freely, faithfully, even when it is difficult, even when it is inconvenient, even when it costs us deeply, in the unseen things, the uncelebrated things, without the need to be an up-fronter that everyone sees, without

complaint, without griping, without the need for accolades or recognition, or for everyone to know how much you sacrificed, or even the need for a “thank you” but instead, simply motivated by the deep love and faithful sacrifice of Christ on our behalf and for our good. It is not just simply identifying needs and saying that someone really needs to be doing “x, y or z” BUT meeting them, seeing ways to encourage and spur one another on to holiness and doing it, seeing ways that you can put someone else before you in big things and small things and then doing it. The possibilities are endless. That is servanthood and that is the pathway to greatness in the kingdom. It is the exact opposite of what the disciples were battling for and what we often pursue.

That kind of thing sounds completely foreign to fallen ears, completely opposite of the way we want things to be, because it is. We want to serve. The first question on our minds is so often what we get out of it. Jesus declares that there is a massive contrast between greatness in the eyes of the world and true greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Greatness in the eyes of the world is determined by status, position, wealth, power, etc., but true greatness in the kingdom of heaven, in the eyes of God, is shown by humility and service. Pride and self-seeking are very antithetical to the heart of Christianity. To be self-seeking is the denial of Jesus Christ who made Himself nothing for us and for our salvation. To be self-seeking is a denial of Jesus Christ.

The pathway to true greatness is humble-minded servanthood. This lesson is very simple, yet exceedingly hard. If you want to be regarded as great in God’s kingdom, then make it your purpose, our aim to give yourself in service to others. Start thinking of yourself as a slave to your brothers and sisters in the Lord. How does a slave think of himself? He certainly does not go around expecting people to serve him. On the contrary, he recognizes that it is his responsibility to meet the needs of others. One way that you can judge how far along you are in manifesting a servant’s heart is by taking note of how you respond when someone treats you like one. When feelings of resentment, bitterness, or anger emerge when our acts of kindness seem unappreciated that is a good indicator that we still have a way to go in our pursuit of true greatness.

So there can be no mistaking what He is saying, Jesus uses Himself as the supreme example of what He is talking about -- the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus laid aside His honor and the expression of His glorious majesty and came to us to accomplish His God-given mission to call sinners to repentance, to seek and save that which was lost, to save sinners. We were slaves to sin, unable to liberate ourselves

from the bondage we were in. We had no power and no spiritual wealth by which to gain our release. But Christ humbled Himself, became a servant, laying aside His true greatness, and redeemed us at the cost of His precious blood and purchased us for Himself. Jesus came to give His life in the place of many as a substitute for many. That act of Jesus is unique and unrepeatably. Still, Jesus says that we should serve “just as” the Son of Man came to serve. While Christ’s work is unique, His life is a pattern for us – to lay down our lives just as Jesus did. Greatness in God’s kingdom does not come by stressing and pressing your authority, nor by being satisfied merely to be concerned only for your own needs. Rather, it is displayed by intentionally meeting the needs of other people.

Jesus willingly humbled Himself and served us, the lowly, in concrete ways. And our service needs to be concrete as well, not some abstract desire to serve, but real service. Jesus was concrete in His service. He touched lepers and cleansed them, He healed the sick. He went to the cross for sins that needed atoned for and sinners who needed to be forgiven and rescued. And we need to find ways to make our service and sacrifice as concrete as that of Christ.

Let me explain what I mean by that statement. Servanthood, as the expression of gospel humility, cannot be abstract or a notion only, it must be concrete, it must be done. Think about it like this. James and John needed to be humbled, right? They needed a dose of gospel humility. But gospel humility is not just a state of mind where you think about how lowly and sinful and undeserving you are. It is not simply magnifying your brokenness. They needed gospel humility for sure, all the disciples did, we do – but true humility is not merely an inward state, it must have outward expression. No spiritual grace, no aspect of a living faith in Christ can be practiced only inwardly and the practical expression of real humility and gratitude for the grace of God in our lives is the service of others, in the name of and for the sake of Christ.

This is so vital to understand. To be great in the kingdom of God, you must serve others. True greatness and gospel humility are not achieved by thinking harder and harder about how bad you are, but by becoming a slave to more and more people, living your life more and more for them and not only for yourself, giving yourself more generously and sacrificially to bless, help, and seek the benefit of others.

For every nine who talk about humility and brokenness and how unworthy they are and even, sometimes use it as an attention getting ploy, for all the hundreds that talk spiritual talk, there are the few who engage the inconvenience, the difficulty, the pain, the hardship, the hard work

and many times the thanklessness of faithfully serving, faithfully looking for ways to bless other people, and really consider them more significant than themselves, doing good for other people, faithfully working out the gospel and the Lordship of Christ in their lives. Those are the truly great in the kingdom of heaven. Gospel humility leads to faithful service – it is intimately tied to your comprehension of Christ’s own sacrifice and faith in the gospel. It has to be expressed concretely. And no hiding behind the whole “gift theology” thing – that serving is not my gift. That has been so abused to avoid doing what we know the Word of God commands of us. Are there certain gifts – yes. Is there a gift of service – yes, but it must be one that all of us have or not in view at all in this text or Jesus would not have told us to be slaves to one another. You are to be a living sacrifice, consecrated unto the Lord for His use. None of us is greater than our Master. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Real. Concrete. Sacrificial.

So let me make this concrete for you. Here are some ways that you can serve your brothers and sisters in Christ – some practical ways. Husbands serve your wives. Wives serve your husbands. Siblings serve one another and your parents. Serve your friends. Pick up the towels, fix broken stuff, put the milk away, wash the dishes, talk to and listen to your spouse or your kids, make dinner, wash the car, look for ways to express love and care...the list is endless. How can you serve the church – clean up after yourself and others, clean the pew when you get out of it, help clean up after a dinner at the church, help care for the grounds. Here is huge one – God has blessed us with a growing children’s ministry – something like 75 kids that are 5th grade or under – serve in extended session and be faithful when you sign up. Ask Jill how you can help manage the blessing that God has given to us and do it. We are always shorthanded when it comes to having enough people to help and we always have people that are dropping last minute. It is not an issue of gifting, it is an issue of the heart. If you are a parent or have siblings or have ever picked up a kid, you are qualified. Some say, “I don’t like kids.” Let me tell you that if that is you, you need sanctified. You may even need saved – and I’m not kidding. Open your home to the youth – we have Renown coming up, we always need homes. We need food made. It is time for many of us to start serving, to start pouring out instead of just sucking up ministry. The list is endless if you have eyes to see.

But here is the underlying foundation to all of this. Unless your heart is really invested in Christ’s church, unless you are really committed to this body, unless you have humbled yourself to be a part of something bigger than you, unless you are make your life here, unless this church is more to you than just a place to get you needs met, or to learn some theology, or a

good church to go to, unless you see this church as the family of Christ and really desire to find your place in it, unless it is more about the family of God as a whole and not just you, you will never really “see” the needs and where to serve. You won’t see the person with no family in this area who needs a surrogate home, you won’t see the widow in Richfield who would love to have her hair fixed, you won’t see the person in desperate need of a friend and Biblical counsel and encouragement, you won’t see the young married couple who is struggling to find their feet, you won’t see the mulch beds that need weeding, you won’t see the walls that need painting, you won’t see the family that needs financial help. You just won’t see it or the millions of other needs that need met. Instead, your thoughts will orbit around what you are receiving rather than what you can be giving. And, frankly, you just won’t care. You will be content to let someone else do it or for it to be left undone.

J.C. Ryle says, "True greatness consists not in receiving, but in giving, not in selfish absorption of good things, but imparting good to others. Not in being served, but in serving. Not in sitting still and being ministered to, but in going about and ministering to others." So the big question is this:

Do You Desire True Greatness or Temporary Prominence?

You can pursue greatness by this world’s standards, greatness in your own mind, fleeting prominence or you can pursue true greatness. Jesus sets this teaching of true greatness in the kingdom between two accounts of His own sacrifice of Himself for us – the truly great serving the lowly. When we are so unworthy in and of ourselves, when we owe our eternal life to so great a love and sacrifice and humble service, it should be utterly evident to us how utterly inconsistent with true faith in Christ is a life that is characterized by pride and vainglory and selfishness which is what the refusal to serve is. In view of what Christ had to do for us to save us, to seek honor for ourselves and live for ourselves is arrogant and ridiculous. The glorious, exalted, majestic Son of God came to serve and to give His life a ransom for many and we must do the same. Let our lives be a living sacrifice unto the Lord. We belong to Him. We do not have ownership over ourselves anymore but Christ owns us and so let us serve Him and serve His people with gladness, with joy, with a willingness to spend and be spent for the gospel, even for the sake of the lowliest as Christ Jesus did for us. No one is greater than Jesus Christ, and no one has humbly served others more sacrificially than He. If you want to be great in His kingdom, then take up your cross and follow Him in a life of joyful sacrifice that blesses and serves other people.

I am convinced that when Christ's grace lays hold of us, it makes us more alive to others, more caring of their needs and wellbeing, more interested in the ins and outs and the ups and downs of their daily lives, more willing to lay down our lives for their welfare and happiness, less preoccupied with ourselves and more invested in others. When we really believe the gospel, Christ and His life, His love, His selflessness becomes the pattern for our own lives because having been loved with a great love by Christ, we want to love others ourselves; redeemed by a great sacrifice, we will want to sacrifice for others ourselves; having been given eternal life because of another's service for us, we will believe that such selfless service is God-honoring and good. What we find in Christ, we want to emulate ourselves – not for our glory but for his and not primarily for the sake of our souls but for the sake of others. Having looked to Christ for salvation, we now look to others to serve Christ in His name and for His sake. True greatness in the kingdom is the imitation of Christ in his selfless, costly love for others. May we seek true greatness.

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