

# The Question of Greatness

Matthew 20:20-28

**MPS** Greatness in God's Kingdom is marked by humility to serve so others can hear the gospel and trust in Jesus.

**OBJ** Every person can be great in God's Kingdom because of Three Aspects of Greatness.

## READ Matthew 20:20-28

*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. <sup>21</sup>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." <sup>22</sup>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." <sup>23</sup>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." <sup>24</sup>And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup>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 20:20-28***

**We are still on the way to Jerusalem.** Along the same journey, a big question gets dropped that creates quite an issue among the disciples. [This was some journey they were on, was it not?! Road trip and all that "together-time" always creates opportunity for the best AND the worst to come out among the family!] We know they were still on the same journey, though we do not know if the question immediately followed or occurred some time later. [Here is what we do know: Jesus was focused on His sacrificial death for sin, while the disciples were debating their positions in the Kingdom!](#)

The mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to Jesus, knelt before Him and requested permission to ask a question. Her posture demonstrates an attitude of honor before the Lord. Jesus asks her what she wants, and she asks for her sons to sit on His right and left hand in His Kingdom, the two positions of highest honor in a kingdom. [I suppose if you have an opportunity to ask, you might as well ask for it all!] This is no small ask! From Mark's gospel we know her sons wanted to make the request, but here we learn that they got her to ask for them.

Jesus responds, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Jesus says, "You have no idea what you are asking. And if you did know, you probably would not ask it." Jesus does not explain his reference to "drink the cup", but the disciples would have understood this as a reference to suffering.<sup>1</sup> While they would not experience Jesus' same suffering, He tells them that they too will suffer in their own way, but to determine seats of honor in the Kingdom is reserved only for the Father. But an even more telling response is that from the other disciples. Verse 24 states that when the other ten heard this they were very angry. The request was a double-dagger of betrayal; they broke the confidentiality of the twelve's discussion and tried to gain an advantage by advancing their own position. What angered the others was NOT that they had a more accurate understanding of the Kingdom, but that they feared losing the opportunity for as high a reward in the kingdom.

Jesus' answer confronts their wrong focus on an earthly kingdom that is revealed by the reaction of the other disciples. The disciples' concept was of an earthly kingdom; Jesus was focused on His heavenly Kingdom. The disciples envisioned an earthly power and rule; Jesus spoke of His heavenly reign of true power and authority. The disciples were focused on what the Kingdom could do for them as Jesus was enthroned. Jesus was leading the disciples to understand the true nature of the Kingdom of God so they could faithfully serve after He was gone. The disciples envisioned a kingdom from conquering; Jesus taught that the kingdom would be won through service, sacrifice, and suffering. The disciples applied their understanding of greatness from a worldly mindset to advance Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus was introducing them to greatness in

<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, [The Gospel according to Matthew](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 510. Morris writes, "but the cup is used in the Old Testament with associations of suffering and sometimes of the wrath of God (e.g., Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15-16)."



His Kingdom that they were to apply to a life of serving Him in this world. [Recognizing the tension among the group, Jesus called them together to stop their competing with one another and provide deeper teaching on true greatness in the Kingdom of God by serving one another.](#)

**TRANS** Jesus' teaching about greatness in the Kingdom of God, and how it is different and distinct from the world, remains true for all Christ-followers today.

**MPS** [Greatness in God's Kingdom is marked by humility to serve so others can hear the gospel and trust in Jesus.](#)

Jesus calls all his disciples to understand the Kingdom, and to shift their faith accordingly. This is an issue of discipleship that demands a step of faith that will change the way they see the Kingdom and the world. The issue each one of us is confronted with today is how we understand greatness. Each of us today must answer these questions personally. [What is "greatness to you?" And where do you need to shift your faith according to Jesus' new understanding?](#)

**OBJ** [Three Aspects of Greatness in the Kingdom of God.](#)

1. [In God's Kingdom, "greatness" demands a new understanding; humility to serve is greater than ambition to rule. .25-26a](#)

*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. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be so among you.*

Jesus addresses a common reality in the world: high positions come with great power, and both are to be desired so one can rule over another. This is what determines greatness in the world. And this is the issue that started this whole skirmish. And to this He states, "*It shall not be do among you.*" [What shall not be?](#) Jesus is not condemning the reality of power or authority in the world. God holds all authority and ordains and bestows it according to His Will. Jesus is condemning the view that values position and power to determine greatness, and therefore the ambition to attain it. In the world, greatness comes by position and power. In the Kingdom, greatness is determined by serving. In the world, greatness is ambition to gain higher position and more power to rule. In the Kingdom, greatness is humility that positions one to serve and bless others. In the world, greatness is reserved only for a few. In the Kingdom, everyone is called and empowered to greatness. Jesus tells the disciples that what determines greatness in the world does not determine greatness in the Kingdom of God.

Greatness is merely a standard set by the values we hold most dear of the way we want others to see our life. When you trust in Jesus, you hold that greatness in the Kingdom of God is of highest value and good, and especially on earth, even though it is of rarest presence and practice. Humbling yourself to serve will always be your practice when Jesus, His Righteousness, and His Kingdom are your highest value. (Matthew 6:33) [The first aspect of greatness in the Kingdom of God is this: humility to serve > ambition to rule.](#)

2. [In God's Kingdom, "greatness" is simple, but it's never easy. .26b-27](#)

*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,* <sup>27</sup>*and whoever would be first among you must be your slave"* "*But whoever would be great among you*", Jesus says. He teaches the disciples that anyone, *whoever*, can be great in the Kingdom of God. [So what determines who IS and who IS NOT great in the Kingdom of God?](#) Those who are great in the Kingdom of God have made an intentional decision NOT to be great, but to serve. There is a reality of one's being that is only determined by one's intentional decision: IF you *would be*, THEN *you must*. What you become is determined by your decision of faith. [The only way to be great in the Kingdom of God is by an intentional decision to exercise faith by humility.](#)

**TRANS** And for this reason I say, greatness in the Kingdom of God is simple, but it is not easy.

If you want to be great, then you must make yourself a servant. If you want to be first, then you must make yourself a slave. Simple, but not easy. Now some would say, "But I don't need to be great nor first.", and that response is one of faithless pride, because we are commanded to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." (Matthew 6:33) Every Christian is commanded to seek true greatness and first-ness according to the Kingdom of God. In God's Kingdom, there are NO flunkies, no failures, no losers. In Christ, ALL are made new and redeemed, and given the ministry and message of the gospel to serve. (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:12) We are ALL a chosen race, part of the royal priesthood, a people



ordained to declare the excellencies of Christ Jesus in this world.(1 Peter 2:9) Greatness in the Kingdom of God is simple for this reason; you don't have to be anything or anyone, you can be a nobody and still have a powerful impact to tell everybody about the One somebody. Only faith in Christ motivates the decision to hold of highest value what is "great" and "first" according to HIS KINGDOM so you serve. **Greatness in the Kingdom is not easy for this reason; you must crucify your need, desire, and ambition to be great, to serve so others can come to know the only One who truly IS great, Jesus Christ.**

**TRANS** There is another VERY important intentional decision present in this passage. This will be the most unpopular thing I say today, and likely, the most challenging.

*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. <sup>21</sup>And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine...*

**APPL** Parents should exercise the same faith in humility in decisions for their children. Here is what I mean.

Dads and moms, when you do everything for your kids, pull strings to always create perfect environments or experiences, ask for special favors or gain privileges, and particularly in relation to knowing Jesus, in the church, and living the Christian life, you do wrong, and hinder and harm your children. You are not creating the perfect situation for your child, but rather molding your child into the perfect storm. Your role is not to create the perfect life for your kids. From the day they are born, parenting is a measured preparation of ceasing to do "for them", as much as possible as quickly as possible, to teach and train them how to live to honor the Lord with their whole life. "*Like arrows in the hand of a warrior*", the Psalmist(127:4) states, not trophies on the wall to validate parenting greatness. Nurturing them in Christ's image to this very end is your single priority and role. Some will say, "But it is only when they are young. I won't do it once they...[blah, blah, blah]." Yes you will. You will have to, because doing it all for them as children stripped them of the opportunity to learn how to do it, so they are incapable, or at least fearful and anxious, to try now as an adult. But most of all, you don't doing it for them to begin with, but for you. Therefore, the sons of Zebedee, grown men, had their momma go ask Jesus a question for them. And she did! The sons of Zebedee's mother perceived greatness by the success of her kids, through which she acted to advance them instead of trusting to encourage them in faith. Proverbs 22:6 says, "*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*" It does NOT say "Create the perfect environment for a child's training and guarantee the way they will go". But it could say, "Create the perfect environment for your child, and when he/she is old they won't know which way to go." Don't do for your kids what they should and need to be doing or learning for themselves. And never do for your kids what they should not do themselves. When you do the latter, you sin for them in their place. And you validate that sin in their eyes / mind. When you do the former, you hinder their spiritual growth and maturity, by teaching & training them that it's okay for you to do for them. It's not. Don't. You don't get to answer to God for your children's lives, only your work in parenting. You are responsible to train them to answer for their own lives now. If they never learn personal responsibility and accountability before God now, they will never sense any need for nor the true sweetness of grace in their greatest need. They'll only see faith in Jesus as another way to get favors and privileges to serve self. Greatness in God's Kingdom is simple, but it's not easy. It requires your intentional faith decision for your children on their behalf.

**The second aspect of greatness in the Kingdom of God is this: greatness is simple, but ≠ easy.**

**3. In God's Kingdom, "greatness" produces more Christlikeness, in the one who serves and by others who come to know Christ. .28**

*<sup>28</sup>even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Our standard for true greatness is revealed and modeled for us in Jesus Christ. He came to serve and to sacrifice so others could have eternal life. Jesus' one focus on this whole journey was to accomplish the mission the Father gave Him. His sacrifice is not one that anyone else can make, but His example is one every Christ-follower is called to follow. **We are never more like Christ than when by faith in Him we deny self to sacrifice in serving Him.**

Many ask: "**Is serving supposed to exhaust and hurt? I thought serving God was supposed to satisfy us, to help us feel the pleasure of God?**" The sacrifice of serving definitely produces unwanted scenarios and unpleasant-nesses. Some interpret that as a sign that their decision was wrong and they need to re-direct to a more pleasant experience. According to the Bible, sacrifice and serving for the Christian is intended to do far more than cause pain. God has ordained that you might share in the fellowship of Christ's suffering FOR you, so that you can also share in His resurrection power IN



you.(Philippians 3:10) Christians do not aim to die for their sins in their serving, for that would do no good. But we aim to die to self in serving that our whole life would be a sacrifice unto Christ.(Romans 12:2) It's not about the pain nor the sacrifice, but about learning that Christ is sufficient and altogether worthy in the midst of it all. And James says, "God is working in you to purge your sin from you, so more of Christ's righteousness will define you as you become more like Jesus. Keep going!"(James 1:3-5)

**ILLUS** In his book, The Seeking Heart, 17<sup>th</sup> century French monk Francois Fenelon, wrote, "The more God loves you, the less He spares you." "The greatest thing", he goes on to say, "is to suffer without being discouraged."<sup>2</sup>

God was pleased in Christ's atoning death, not because of the pain it inflicted, but because of what it produced. Romans 8:32 states, "*He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all,*". **WHY does Paul say that God did not spare His own son?** So that He will "*also with him graciously give us all things.*" Christ suffered and die in your place so God could bestow upon you His righteousness and grant to you all the reward and riches of Heaven! Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is not like greatness in this world because Heaven's reward is incomparable to this world; it doesn't merely give you a higher position or power, but makes you like the One who IS righteous. And when we serve the Kingdom, God uses our service so others can hear the gospel and come into the Kingdom. **Greatness in the Kingdom of God always produces Christlikeness in the One who humbles themselves to serve, and in other's who are served in Christ's Name.**

**The third aspect of greatness in the Kingdom of God is this: true greatness => Christlikeness.**

**Greatness in God's Kingdom is marked by humility to serve so others can hear the gospel and trust in Jesus.**

**CLOSE** **What is greatness to you? Where do you need to shift your focus according to Jesus' new understanding?**

**One Summary Application:** **In the Kingdom of God; serve > sit.**

---

<sup>2</sup> Francois de Fenelon, The Seeking Heart. (Jacksonville, FL, SeedSowers Publishing, 1992), p73-74.

