

**“True Greatness”**  
**Matthew 20:17-28**  
**February 17, 2019**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

For the third time in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus takes his disciples aside and tells them of his coming suffering and death in Jerusalem. Once again, they don’t respond well. After the first time Jesus spoke to them about this, Peter took him aside to rebuke him, which elicited from Jesus a harsh rebuke: **“Get behind me, Satan!”** (Matthew 16:23). This time, their response is also lacking in a significant way. James and John send their mother to ask Jesus to grant to her two sons positions of greatness in his coming kingdom, with one sitting on his right hand and the other on his left. Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t rebuke their desire for greatness, but challenges their definition of greatness. Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples, “Stop trying to be great.” Rather, he says, **“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant”** (v. 26).

Why does Jesus challenge their definition of greatness rather than their ambition for greatness? To answer that question, we have to take a step back and see the overall perspective of the Bible on human greatness. God has created humanity for greatness. We are created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth (Gen.1:27-28). That means that among all the animals God created and placed on the earth, none is greater than man and woman. And he promised Abraham, **“I will bless you and make your name great”** (Gen 12:2). And Jesus said earlier in Matthew that whoever does his commands and teaches others to do so **“will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”** (5:19). We are all familiar with Donald Trump’s campaign slogan when he was running for President: “Make America Great Again.” Whatever you think about our President, I think it’s clear that this slogan resonated with large numbers of voters. Part of the reason for that is that he has tapped into who God has created us to be.

But there is also a dark side to the pursuit of greatness. Satan tapped into this in the temptation of Adam and Eve, promising the greatness of being like God if they would eat the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:5). And at the Tower of Babel, the whole enterprise was energized by the ambition to make a great name for themselves (Gen 11:4). So when Jesus corrects James and John, he does so not by rebuking their desire for greatness, but by rebuking their method of achieving greatness. Jesus seeks to correct them and us as well, for we are more like James and John than we perhaps would like to admit.

**I. The World’s Greatness**

James and John, and all the other disciples as well, have fallen victim to the world's view of greatness. Jesus had recently promised his disciples that **“in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones”** (19:28). The twelve disciples would be great, right at the top, just under Jesus. It would seem, though, that the number twelve began to get under the skin of James and John. As they pictured Jesus sitting on his glorious throne and the twelve sitting around him, they began to wonder about the seating chart. Two of the twelve would be accorded the places of greatest honor among the twelve, sitting at Jesus' left and right. They covet those places for themselves.

They decide that the best strategy for landing these positions of honor is simply to ask Jesus. But instead of approaching him themselves, they send their mother. Older women in this culture were accorded special respect, so the two brothers think their chances will be better if the request comes from their mother. Jesus tells her and her sons two things. First, he says, they are ignorant of what is involved in such honor. It involves drinking a cup, a clear reference to Jesus' suffering and death. To get honor requires following Jesus into death. Second, he says that this is not even his to grant, a statement like many others in the New Testament that reveals Jesus' submission to his heavenly Father.

The ten other disciples hear this interchange between Jesus, James and John, and they are angry. It's clear that their anger is not a righteous anger. Instead, they are angry because they didn't think of this first. They all want these places of highest honor, and they are mad at James and John for beating them to the punch in attempting to seize it first. There is sometimes an idealistic view that looks upon the early church as some pristine form of Christianity, free from all the conflict, infighting and pettiness that often afflicts the modern church. From its earliest, the Church has suffered from the kind of raw, selfish ambition we see here not just in James and John, but in all the disciples. If we are honest, we would admit that it lies within our hearts as well.

Jesus puts his finger on the central problem here. It is, as we've already said, not the ambition for greatness, but the path for getting there. He finds in his disciples a worldly approach to greatness, defining it as how many people serve you. This corrupt view of greatness wants to climb the ladder of success in order to have many people serving you. You say “Jump,” and they say “How High?” on their way up.

I was at the gym this week when a man walked in and saw a friend of his already there working out. This friend had just returned from a vacation at a five-star resort. He was asked, “How was your vacation?” “Oh, it was great. The food was excellent and the accommodations were first class all the way. But I can't commend the service. Once when I returned to my room, I called room

service to ask for a bucket of ice as I was getting into the shower. By the time I got out of the shower, the ice still wasn't there, and I had to go get it myself." Isn't that the worldly greatness Jesus is condemning here? We want to make it to the top so everyone can serve us. Don't you also see this impulse in your own heart? I know I do in my heart.

## II. The Church's Greatness

Jesus' rule for greatness is simple. **"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"** (v. 26-27). Greatness in the kingdom of God is exactly opposite from the world's view of greatness. It is measured not by how many are under you to serve you, but how many you are serving. One of the characters in Plato asks, "How can anyone be happy when he is the slave of anyone else at all?" Jesus turns this on its head and asks, in effect, "How can anyone be happy unless one is the slave of everyone else?"

Our English translation uses two different words that describe the role Jesus would have us embrace: "servant" and "slave." That reflects the fact that two different words are also used in the original. One of them, translated "servant" has in view the duties of a servant. It is the word *diakonia* in Greek, from which we get our word "deacon." It refers to someone who does the necessary, but menial tasks that need doing. The word is sometimes translated "table-waiter" in order to reflect this. We've probably all had the experience of enjoying a large family gathering around a meal. The food has been excellent, the conversation good, and no one wants it to end. But there is a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen that needs washing. It is the least favorite job associated with such gatherings, but someone must do it. The servant, the *diakonia*, steps up to perform this task.

The word "slave," *doulos* in the original, has in view the low status of such a person. It is often the case that we shy away from some jobs not because the job itself is so unpleasant, but because the status associated with the job makes the job distasteful. A few years back, *Discovery* channel ran a show called *Dirty Jobs*. The host, Mike Rowe, began every episode with these words: "My name's Mike Rowe, and this is my job. I explore the country looking for people who aren't afraid to get dirty—hard-working men and women who earn an honest living doing the kinds of jobs that make civilized life possible for the rest of us. Now, get ready to get dirty." Each episode featured one such job, including jobs such as roadkill cleaner, sewer inspector and avian vomitologist. It is the same in the Church. There are jobs that are more difficult to fill just because the status associated with them is not very high.

It is precisely the jobs that no one else wants to do, the jobs with low status, but jobs that need doing, that Jesus would have us pursue. If you want to be great in God's kingdom, he says, do these jobs. There are multiple practical applications of this. Let me mention three of them. First, our daily agenda is to be set in accordance with the needs of others rather than our own needs. Isn't that what servants do? A servant's day is determined by the needs of the one he or she serves. The question we should ask as we plan our day is this: "What people-need is God calling me to meet today?" If you are a boss at your workplace, Jesus gives you the assignment of serving the needs of those under you. If you're a mom whose children are still home, you are to serve those children. Husbands are to serve their wives and vice-versa.

If we are going to structure our day in accordance with the needs of others, we are going to need God's help. So the second application is to pray daily for a servant's heart. Divine intervention is required if we are to reverse the natural tendency we all have to be served rather than to serve.

Third, young people do well to use this principle in choosing a calling in life. When it's time to choose a college major or a career path, it is important to ask yourself the right question. The question our society urges upon our young people is the wrong question: "What will bring me fulfillment?" All too often, the answer to that question is to make a lot of money, with the result that decisions are made with that in mind. Here's the question this passage would recommend: "What people-need is God calling me to address in a significant way and in a life-long pursuit?"

### **III. Christ's Greatness**

The last verse of our passage answers the very important "why" question. Why should we embrace the humble role of the servant? It would be very easy after hearing a sermon on this topic to do some token act of service for others for a day or two and then slip right back into the ladder-climbing, self-centered pattern of using other people instead of serving them. God's goal for us in this passage is much greater than getting you to do the dishes this afternoon. God wants us to embrace the identity and lifestyle of the servant, and this last verse tells us why. **"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** As a follower of Jesus, we follow Jesus. He came as a servant, not just by doing occasional, token acts of service, but to give everything for our sakes.

This verse is one of the fundamental verses explaining what happened when Jesus died on the cross. When we say Jesus died for our sins, here is what Jesus means by that. In short, he died to ransom sinners from our plight that is due to our sin. Let's consider more carefully the word "ransom." We are most familiar with the word when it is used to describe a payment made to gain

the release of a kidnap victim. In ancient times, a king might pay a ransom to gain the release of a general or a son who had been captured in battle. So the first thing we learn from this word is something about the human condition. We are enslaved and in bondage. Our captivity is due to sin, which makes us subject to the wrath and judgment of God. Further, our captivity is so complete that we are unable to extricate ourselves from it. No amount of good works on our part can free us from this bondage. We are all like prisoners in the super-max federal prison in Colorado where America keeps its most serious criminals. Every piece of furniture is made from concrete. The cell has only a four inch window. Prisoners are isolated from one another and in complete isolation in their cells 23 hours out of every 24. The only contact allowed with visitors is through a thick sheet of plexiglass.

But Jesus has come to serve us in our desperate need. He has come not just to pay a ransom, but to be a ransom. The ransom price was his own life. Notice that the text says that he was a ransom *for* many. Greek has two words for that preposition translated “for.” This one, *anti*, has the sense of “in place of.” It communicates the idea of substitution. Jesus served by being a ransom *in place of* many, dying in our place as our substitute. Since he went that far in his service to us, he calls us to follow him in that kind of serving of others.

There’s another way I see the servant heart of Jesus here. I note his gentleness with his disciples, who are all behaving in such a self-centered way. Jesus has just spoken to them about his death, and they respond by fighting with one another in an attempt to be the greatest. They are not serving one another, but playing the children’s game “king of the hill,” clawing at one another to keep others from getting there first. We couldn’t blame Jesus if he said, “I’m sick and tired of your self-centered behavior. It’s like you didn’t hear a thing I said about my coming suffering and death. I’m done with you people.” Instead, he gently and patiently teaches them.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me summarize it like this. You will never be able to serve like Jesus commands here, and you will never realize the human greatness he puts before us by being a servant, until you let Jesus serve you. Our text says that Jesus came to serve, and if you don’t let him serve you, you have missed the very purpose of his coming. Humility is required to let another serve you. I’ve mentioned before my experience of this when I broke both my wrists and had to be fed by others for several weeks. We let Jesus serve us by giving up on our efforts to earn salvation by something we do and humbly receive Jesus’ payment for our sins. He became a ransom in our place, giving of himself in our place. As we let Jesus serve us, we then move out joyfully to serve others.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 20:17-28**

1. Where have you witnessed Christians being faithful servants? Tell some of the stories of these servants.
2. Can you think of a time in your life when serving others has brought joy to you?
3. Our culture has benefitted greatly from Christianity's emphasis on servanthood. Think of the many schools, hospitals, universities and poverty relief programs that have their roots in Christianity. Where else do you see this positive benefit of servanthood in our culture? Where do you see its opposite, a "me-first" attitude that takes care of self first, no matter what it may cost others?
4. There is a great deal of emphasis given today to "servant-leadership." How would you define that? Do you have opportunities in your life to exercise such servant leadership?
5. Notice how easy it is to be selfish while serving the Lord. James and John, along with the rest of the disciples, had left everything to follow Jesus. But here they are using their privileged position with Jesus for selfish purposes. Can you think of ways you, or others you have seen, have been fundamentally selfish while serving the Lord? For example, it is easy for a preacher to preach his sermon for the applause of people rather than as a ministry to the Lord's people.
6. Notice that Jesus redirects rather than rebukes their desire for greatness. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (v. 26). Do you believe that? What are some evidences that will be present if that is believed? What are some obstacles to service that might be cleared away if this is believed?
7. Jesus is the greatest servant in this passage. How do you see him serving?
8. Is there some specific step God might be calling you to take in following Jesus into the life of the servant?