

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

Introduction

In this passage we find a mother's request (vv.20-21) and a king's reply (vv.22-23). The request will prompt a response on the part of the disciple's (v.24). Jesus will use both the request and the response of the disciples as a teachable moment. In that moment Jesus will teach about true Biblical leadership as selflessness and service and in this specific instance the certainty of suffering.

Jesus will teach His disciples what it means to be great in God's Kingdom.

In this passage we will see Greatness is selflessness—service—suffering—and substitution.

Let's remind ourselves of the context of this passage. For the third time Jesus has announced the news that the Son of Man will go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders and the Gentile authorities, that he will be crucified and rise from the dead on the third day (vv.17-19). Granted that's a lot to take in. A cross awaits the King. The first time Jesus spoke about a cross Peter attempted to rebuke Jesus. Now it prompts a selfish prayer on the part of the mother of James and John. The message of the Cross still remains difficult to hear.

A Mother's Request (vv.20-21)

Matthew 20:20 (NKJV) 20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" 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."

It makes perfect sense that a mother will ask favors for children.

She kneels and assumes the position of worship. But her real motive was not to present something to him but rather to get something from him!

We are not immune from this temptation. We are sometimes guilty of coming to Christ in order to get something we think we desperately need. **True worship allows for praise and adoration on the basis of God's worthy character not simply not His generous nature.**

The mother of James and John was named Salome (see Matt. 27:56; Mk.15:40; 16:1). Some Bible scholars suggest she was the sister of Mary—which means both James and John were cousins of Jesus. In Mark's gospel we find Salome at the cross with Mary Jesus' mother (Mark 15:40). In John's Gospel we read "Jesus' mother, His mother's sister" (John 19:25).

When Peter reminded Jesus that they had left all to follow Jesus—"So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory,

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:27-28)—the mother of James and John believed in this future kingdom.

In the future kingdom there will be places of honor and glory and authority.

But again there is something not quite right with her motive—she is not asking for God’s glory but her own.

No one should be surprised that a mother might ask for right things for wrong reasons.

Is this a mother’s ambition for her children or has James and John conspired with their mother to make this request? What is the source of the request? We have every reason to believe the brothers were very much on board with their mother’s request. What is their request? Power—glory—greatness.

In Mark’s gospel (10:35) we read that James and John came with the request. **There is no contradiction. Both mother and sons sought the positions of honor.**

Ambition takes two roads in the Bible. Not all ambition is wrong. We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). We are to make it our ambition to lead quiet lives, minding our own business, working with our hands” (1 Thess. 4:11).

William Carey famously said, “Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God.”

Paul warns, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition” (Philippians 2:3). How do we know if what we are doing constitutes false ambition? Is your ambition self-seeking and self-serving? Are you looking for recognition and affirmation? Is your ambition deceptive? Do you use people to get what you want—or do you serve people to get what God wants? **False ambition is deceptive and is often associated with using and abusing those we should be loving and serving.**

Do you use money, influence, power and position as bargaining chips for divine favors? Peter James and John formed Christ’s inner circle. They were in a position to see things and do things not always available to their peers. Sometimes friendship with famous people can bring an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

False ambition is often fueled by pride—and the more honor one receives the more likely the proud person will look on others with contempt or worse—indifference.

False ambition—almost always misunderstands the facts. The facts that Jesus revealed focused on His imminent suffering and death and resurrection! What in the world were the disciples thinking? Did they think that Jesus would really die and really come back to life?

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

Healthy ambition—God honoring ambition will bring purpose, meaning and significance into our lives. There is no sin in leadership, or positions of authority and responsibility. **The sin comes when we Lord over people’s lives—assuming the role of rulers instead of servants.**

The King’s Reply (vv.22-23)

22But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.”

All ambition comes with a price. The mother and the sons seem fairly ignorant of what Jesus means by the cup and the baptism. The cup is of course the cup of suffering and the baptism is a reference to death. We might think of this as a kind of total immersion in suffering that will lead to death.

If Jesus is speaking to both mother and sons they have no idea what it is they are asking for. What mother would wish for that kind of pain and suffering? What kind of person would volunteer for martyrdom?

The cup that Jesus will drink and the baptism that awaits Jesus is a baptism in blood. This is a reference to his painful death on the Cross (see Matthew 26:39-42 and Luke 12:50).

23So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; 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.”

What does greatness require?

We must be willing to count the cost.

We do not simply contemplate the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death. We enter into that suffering and death. In what sense? It is the conscience and deliberate decision to embrace the **spiritual disciplines of obedience to Christ and the death of self. It means we seek God’s will above personal comfort, or self-indulgence or extravagance.**

This means you must be willing to think about—contemplate—consider what and who you are seeking. You are seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. You are seeking to serve Jesus and His saints. **This is going to take concentration, energy and effort.** It will require learning and knowing and understanding the Bible.

It means paying any price in order to secure God’s given purpose for your life in Christ.

When Jesus asks James and John “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able” (v.22).

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

We can of course talk about their ignorance and naïveté. But let's for a moment take their response at face value—even as Jesus takes their response at face value. **James and John accept the challenge and embrace the challenge.**

This is the price of determination. We accept the challenge. We accept the challenge because we love the Lord Jesus. We are willing to drink the cup of suffering. We are willing to embrace the discipline of suffering and obedience. We are willing to die to self daily and take up our cross. We are willing to embrace an unshakable loyalty to Jesus. James and John will indeed drink from that cup and experience that baptism.

In the book of Acts (12:1) we read; “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword”.

This was Herod Agrippa I.

John will live many more years. But this does not mean he will be exempt from suffering. John will witness the death of Jesus on the Cross. He will live through the murder and martyrdom of his brother and all the other apostles. He will experience banishment and exile on the Island of Patmos (see the introduction to the book of Revelation).

When Jesus describes greatness in the Kingdom he does not sugar coat the prescription or minimize the cost.

Jesus does not deny their request. But reminds them that the positions asked for are reserved for those that the **Father has determined**. God the Father will reward God the Son and His followers according to His perfect judgment.

You will get exactly what you deserve.

The Disciples' Response (v.24)

24 And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.

Are you surprised that selfishness can cause trouble for those closest to you?

Why in the world would the other disciples be “greatly displeased with the two brothers”?

The disciples would have us believe they are shocked and disappointed that James and John would use their relationship with Jesus in a grab for power!

Because they desired the position of glory and honor and dominion. They wanted the positions for themselves.

What is happening? There is a growing jealousy and rivalry!

Greatness In The Kingdom Matthew 20:20-28

How will this effect the mission that Jesus has for His disciples?

The mission would never be accomplished in an atmosphere of jealousy and rivalry! Jesus had called them to love one another and serve one another. **The disciples were unable to see the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men.**

A Teachable Moment (vv.25-28)

25But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them.

26Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.

Jesus contrasts the Gentile (read human) version of greatness with God's view of greatness.

In the Kingdoms of men the rulers of the Gentiles 'lord it over them' and 'exercise authority over them'. **The world apart from Christ wants to Lord it over people, control people, dominate people, exercise dominion over people.**

In the Greek world and the Roman world **humility and service were the lowest virtues.**

The disciples at this point still think that Messiah's Kingdom and Israel's restoration was one of dominion.

What constitutes greatness? Greatness is serving others. These are the bond-slaves. The word translated great is *protos—and is sometimes translated chief—or first.*

27And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—

There is a contrast between the great (v.26) and the first (v.27)—the minister (v.26) and the bond-slave (v.27). The great are those who minister—the chief—or the first are the bond-slaves.

The idea of minister—here—is the person who is the occasional minister—the temporary servant—but the bond servant—is the slave who is the slave by choice—the bond servant is the servant who is bound to the Master—every moment—of every day—of every week—of every month—of every year—and every year—of what will be their life. Their life is lived in service to the Master. The Lord Jesus leaves us with the impression that there are those who provide occasional service. And there are those who provide continual service.

28just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

Why in the world would the disciples entertain the notion that selflessness and service and sacrifice and suffering is the way to go?

Because this is exactly what Jesus does!

The true leader has a servant's heart. Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man—identifying Himself as human. He is the Son of God. He is the source of power and the Creator of the world. But he has hidden His glory and taken on the form of a servant. He will pay the ultimate price in order to serve others. He will give His life as a ransom for sin. Human beings were in bondage and slavery to sin. Paul knowing this would write to the Philippians (2:5-8) “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”. This means “have this attitude or adopt this outlook”. Think about this the way Jesus thought about it. “Who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”.

In this single passage Jesus lays out true greatness in three supreme acts:

1. Jesus *came*—(the incarnation)
2. Jesus came not to serve but serve—(Jesus secures His Kingdom in part not by dominating men but rather serving men).
3. Jesus gives His life a ransom for many (the substitutionary atonement).

Ransom is an exchange.

In the Old Testament ransom was the redemptive price paid in order to set a slave free (Leviticus 19:20). It was the redemptive price paid for land (Leviticus 25:24). It was the redemptive price paid for a captive (Isaiah 45:13).

The word ransom is used two other times in the New Testament (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6). In Mark's gospel we read “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”. In 1 Timothy 2:6 Paul writes; “who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” In context Jesus is the one Mediator between the one God and humanity.

The mission of Jesus was to serve and save. Jesus takes our place. Jesus dies the death we deserve. Jesus makes payment not with silver or gold but rather His own precious blood (see 1 Peter 1:18-19).

The disciples thought that the life and power of Jesus would deliver them from the political and social and economic entanglements of a foreign government. But Jesus wants to save

Greatness In The Kingdom

Matthew 20:20-28

them from something far worse—far more destructive—sin. Jesus tells them he will die—but now he tells them why he will die—as a ransom. To set them free—from the penalty of sin and the bondage of sin.

Jesus is willing to take the lowest place so you can have a higher place.

And because Jesus was willing to take the lowest place here—He will be given the highest place in God's glorious Kingdom.

Are you surprised that selflessness and service lead to greatness?
Are you surprised that brokenness is the path to usefulness?
Are you surprised that sacrifice is God's chosen means of salvation?

Not your sacrifice—but Christ's sacrifice for you.
Do you want to be great in God's Kingdom? Learn to be the servant of all.

Conclusion

Selflessness

Service

Suffering

Sacrifice (Substitution)