

## Kingdom Greatness – Matthew 20:20-28

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Forgetting Things

1. Do you forget things? I do – all the time.
  2. This week, got a coffee-brewer for the office across the street so I could make my own coffee.
    - a. but I keep forgetting to bring coffee filters and a coffee measure from home.
    - b. I always remember when I'm lying in bed at night, and say, "Tomorrow morning, remember to bring them to the office."
    - c. but every morning I walk out the door without them!
  3. I do that all the time with all kinds of little things.
  4. But sadly I find that I do it all the time with far more important things too; things of the spirit.
    - a. I'll forget an important truth in the face of temptation.
    - b. or neglect a key principle when dealing with a trial.
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5. We live in a world that seems to *conspire* to distract us from the things of the spirit.
  6. This corrupt world system, orchestrated as it is by the devil, constantly barrages us with sights and sounds that aim at creating a kind of spiritual amnesia within us –
  7. Calling us to define our lives by the world's values and priorities, rather than God's.
  8. All of us want to be *successful* – The only question is: **What do we mean by success?**
    - a. do we define success by the world's standards or God's?
    - b. *whose* recognition are we aiming at, *whose* approval matters most?
    - c. is our *ambition* to see our name in neon lights--or hear the words, "Well done, My good & faithful servant"?
  9. While most of us here would probably say it's *God's* affirmation we desire, we say that *because we're here!*
    - a. but all of us know the challenge living in this world present.
    - b. we don't live here – we live in a hostile world, antagonistic to our faith.
    - c. and we struggle daily with this issue of *what success* we're aiming at.
    - d. two ambitions lie before us like two paths that lead in different directions;
      - 1) one is marked 'fame'
      - 2) the other, 'faithfulness.'

#### B. The Basics

1. The longer I walk with the Lord, the more clear it becomes that the real strength and power of the Christian life is *not* in discovering some deep and hidden truths that are only imparted to those who spend countless hours in intense study and meditation.
2. The glory and power of the Christian life lies in its most basic and fundamental truths.
3. God has put the best and most important stuff on the lowest shelf were even the

simplest can reach them.

4. Today, we're looking at a lesson we've covered often, a truth we encounter again and again, and which is so simple, we could easily miss it.
5. This is a lesson taught often in scripture because God knows it's one the world fights hard to make us forget and neglect.

## II. Text

### A. *Setting the Scene*

1. Jesus is now moving toward Jerusalem and the last week of His life is about to begin.
2. He and the disciples are walking the well-traveled road that leads from the City of Jericho up to the capital some 15 miles away.
3. Jesus has just told the disciples He will soon be betrayed into the hands of the priests, who will condemn Him then turn Him over to the Romans to be tortured and killed.
4. But His death would not be the end of the story – He would rise again the third day!
5. In light of these solemn words of Jesus, what happens next is a little surprising.

### B. V. 20

#### **20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.**

1. Zebedee's sons were the brothers James & John.
  - a. their mother's name was Salome,
  - b. and it seems she was one of the small group of women who followed Jesus on many of His travels.
2. She steps forward now on the sly, to make a special request of Jesus.
3. Mark's account makes it clear that it was her sons, James & John who put her up to this – and when she comes to Jesus, they're hovering in the background.
4. Notice how Matthew says she approached Him; she *knelt* before Him & asked Him for a favor.
  - a. as the King James makes clear - she took the *knelt in the posture of worship*,
  - b. but her *motive* was to *get something* from Him.
5. Do people ever come to church because they need a favor from God?
  - a. over the years I've noticed there are some who seem to treat God like a first-aid kit. You never see them unless they're facing some crisis and need God to fix some situation they've gotten themselves in to.
  - b. then there are those who, like James & John's mother, wanted a special blessing, and thought to kind of grease the skids of her request with a little worship.
    - 1) you know, butter God up a bit with some divine flattery.
    - 2) so they raise their hands a little higher, sing a little louder, work up a bit more fervency into their prayers and worship
    - 3) and the hope is that God will be impressed and endeared to them and so more apt to grant what they desire.
6. Our worship should never be mercenary. We must never lower our praise to divine flattery that only aims at securing God's favor.

- a. in fact, worship is not about us at all!
  - b. the goal and focus of worship is the glory of God.
7. Is it wrong to make requests of God and seek His favor and blessing – of course not! On the contrary, we *ought* to pray for God’s favor. But let’s not *abuse worship* and turn it into something that is aimed at us!
  8. Jesus knew the *motive* behind this mother’s worship and cut to the chase –

**C. V. 21**

**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.”**

1. Remember that it was James and John who put her up to this, so this request really comes from *them*, not her.
2. They asked this because they firmly believed Jesus *was* the Messiah and was about to establish His Kingdom.
3. They were seeking *plum positions* in that Kingdom – desiring a place of power and influence when Jesus took His throne as the Son of David.
  - a. they were ambitious for position; thinking that when Jesus finally declared Himself publicly as the Messiah, He would take the Kingship, not only of Israel, but of the entire world.
  - b. and they came forward here to ask that they be given the role of His chief lieutenants, sitting on each side of His throne, basking in His glory and showing forth their own because of their position at His left & right hand.
4. We have no earthly positions today which correlate to what James & John were seeking.
  - a. the *closest* we might come is to think of this as them asking to be made the vice-president and secretary of state to the President of the United States.
  - b. but then elevate the Presidency to the rulership of the entire world and you get something of the idea of what they were asking for.
5. James and John envisioned the Kingdom of Christ as being just like the earthly kingdoms of their day, only ruled by Jesus instead of the despots & tyrants the world had known.
6. Jesus had to tell them their idea of the Kingdom was not at all what would be.

**D. Vs. 22-23**

**22 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, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.”**

1. When Jesus responds, He doesn’t address their mother; He speaks to the brothers because the request had originated with them, not her.
2. They probably thought, “Jesus is so respectful of women, and specially the elderly. Let’s get Mom to go and ask a favor of Jesus – to give us *the* plum positions in His royal court!”
3. So once she asked, Jesus turned to the boys to ask *them* if they understood what it was they were asking for.
  - a. His kingdom was very different from what they were envisioning -
  - b. and it would only be entered through the greatest sacrifice.

- c. were they ready for such an adventure? Could they endure the suffering He was about to endure in order to win the Kingdom? They said they were.
- 4. By the cup & baptism, Jesus was referring to the suffering He was about to endure.
  - a. He was coming to the great showdown with the forces of this fallen world that had stolen mankind's dominion and enchained humanity to sin and death.
  - b. the battle would be fierce and would cost Him His life.
  - c. but His blood was the price that had to be paid to redeem what had been lost.
- 5. This fallen world system does everything it can to hinder and oppose the emergence of the Kingdom of God, and those who would seek to live in that Kingdom will know the hostility and hatred *of* this world.
- 6. Jesus knew the road to Jerusalem they were on was leading to history's all-time greatest battle, and that it led directly into untold agony for Himself.
- 7. Any who would enter the Kingdom He was about to win would walk their own road of trial, drink their own cup of suffering, and know their own baptism of death – a death to self.
- 8. So when James and John said they could drink the cup and take the baptism, Jesus looked past their own misconceptions of that moment on what all that meant *to* the day when they *would* understand.

**23 So 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.”**

- 9. James was the first of the Apostle to be martyred. Acts 12 tells us Herod Agrippa had him executed about a dozen years after Jesus' resurrection.
- 10. John was the *last* of the Apostle to die, and when he did, it was of natural causes due to old age.
  - a. he was the only one of the Apostles to *not* be martyred, but not for lack of trying.
  - b. the Jews and Romans made several attempts to kill him, but all were unsuccessful.
  - c. most notably, under the emperor Domitian, John was arrested and tortured by being dunked in a vat of boiling oil.
    - 1) the authorities thought for sure that would be the end of him,
    - 2) but when they pulled him out, there wasn't one bit of evidence of harm.
    - 3) this so terrified them with concern they were hurting someone protected by the gods, they decided to just banish him to the island prison of Patmos where he couldn't do any harm by his preaching.
    - 4) tradition tells us he planted a little church there among the other inmates and it was there on Patmos God gave him the visions that came to be the Book of Revelation!
  - d. he died in Ephesus, an old man, in his 90's.
- 11. So, one brother died soon, his cup drunk quickly. The other's cup was held and sipped from for many, long years.

12. Jesus made it clear that while they would indeed share His suffering, their request over *assignments* in the coming Kingdom was not something entrusted to Him. The Father alone would take care of making those appointments.
13. So James and John failed to get what they'd hoped for. But this wasn't the end of the matter! Their sneaky little conspiracy to wangle the plum assignments in Jesus' royal court became known to the *other* disciples.

**E. V. 24**

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

1. When they heard about what James and John had done, they got upset and began to murmur.
2. You can just imagine the scene; the accusations, insults and threats that flew back and forth.
3. But wait, why would the 10 care unless they were just as ambitious?
4. They only got upset because they hoped for the very thing the brothers had asked for.
5. They were probably even ticked the brothers had thought of asking their mom and they hadn't!
6. The point is, these guys – the disciples, the TWELVE, these holy Apostles who frame the foundation of our Faith as Christians – they got into a tizzy over who would get the choicest positions in the coming Kingdom.
7. Jesus used this envy & strife among His followers to impart a crucial lesson -

**F. Vs. 25-28**

**25 But 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. <sup>26</sup> Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. <sup>27</sup> And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—**

1. The rebuke of the Lord is firm & at the same time gentle!
  - a. have you noticed that in your own life?
  - b. when the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, when the Lord brings His rebuke, He always makes it clear what we're doing wrong,
  - c. yet He does so with a gentleness that leaves no opening for offense.
  - d. the Spirit puts His finger squarely on our need, and we know the pain of conviction,
  - e. but feel in that touch the hope and promise of healing if we will but yield to Him.
2. That's Jesus' way here – His rebuke is firm, but gentle. He says –
 

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> Yet it shall not be so among you;

  - a. they knew how it was among the Gentiles because it was precisely the way they were acting!
  - b. the 12 were all vying for positions of power, thinking Jesus' Kingdom would be just like the earthly kingdoms they'd known.

- c. Jesus tells them their ideas on position & power we're *not* in line with the higher reality He was calling them into.
- 4. Greatness in His Kingdom is not about power – it's defined by *service*.
- 5. Really, Jesus takes the whole idea of greatness and turns it upside down.
- 6. In the ancient world, at the very top of society was the king, and at the bottom was the slave.
  - a. the slave was an object, a piece of property, a living tool to be used.
  - b. in the Greek and Roman world, slaves were despised, their humanity barely considered --
  - c. while the epitome of life and living resided with the one who sat on the throne.
  - d. in the kingdoms of man, greatness was accounted by how many people served you.
  - e. Jesus turns that whole system upside down and says, that in His Kingdom, greatness is defined, not by how many serve you, but by how many you serve.
- 7. The greatness Jesus defined here, He *lived*, as is made clear by v. 28
- 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."**
- 8. As the Messiah, the throne of the Kingdom belonged to Him, but Jesus said His role would *not* be *to be served* – but *to serve*.
- 9. He practiced what He preached, and preached it most completely in the cross.
- 10. V. 28 ought to be translated this way -
 

**The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for THE many.**

  - a. by "the many" Jesus means the *entire kingdom of His people* – all the redeemed.
  - b. Yes, Jesus is indeed our King, our Sovereign, and our Master.
  - c. but He is also a Servant to each & every one of us.
  - d. we may, like Peter when the Lord came to wash His feet say, "Oh no Lord, this is too humble a service for You Who are God!"
  - e. but He says the same thing to us He said to Peter, "If you will not let me serve you, then you can have no part with Me."
- 11. You see, Jesus is **THE** greatest in the Kingdom – and because greatness is defined by serving, He *must be* the Servant of **ALL!**

### III. CONCLUSION

#### A. A Vital Lesson

- 1. It's crucial as the followers of Christ that we take a good hard look at our ambition and ask which path we're on;
  - a. do we walk the path of *worldly ambition* which defines greatness and sees success as power & position -
  - b. or do we tread the path of *holy ambition* which sees in service to others the essence of what it means to follow Christ?
- 2. Fame or faithfulness – to which do we aspire?
- 3. After describing the world's idea of greatness, in v. 26 Jesus said to His followers – "**Yet it shall not be so among you.**"

- a. let that sink in for a moment. We are not to define greatness as the world does!
- b. we must *repudiate* the world's ideas of success and greatness!
- c. we must renew our minds and strive for *true* greatness, which doesn't come simply by *saying* that greatness is in serving, but by actually **SERVING!!!**
- d. just as important as having a *basic* theology is having a *basin* theology.
- e. after Jesus had washed the disciples feet with that basin of water and towel, and told them they were to follow His example, He said "If you know these things, blessed are you if you **DO** them." [John 13:17]

## **B. Conforming**

1. In those periods of history when the Church has been persecuted, Christians have found it easier to distinguish between the Kingdom of God and the world.
2. But when persecution is no threat and times are easy, the *world* can present a powerful lure & attraction to the people of God
3. Jesus' words "**Yet it shall not be so among you**" is a stinging rebuke to the manner in which the modern church *looks to the world* for both its substance & style.
4. Much of the Church has defined its idea of success by a business model rather than the Model of Christ.
5. The people of God are not to order their lives by the ways of the world!
6. Greatness, what we all *ought* to aspire to, must not be defined by the values of the world; its fashion, values, or priorities.
7. Our ambition ought to be to follow Jesus – and He said true greatness is found in *servicing* – in putting others first!

## **C. A Superbowl Story**

1. Tom Landry, long time coach of the Dallas Cowboys, was once talking with a friend about the feeling on the team a month after winning the Superbowl.
2. They had come so close year after year, and had finally won the title.
3. But having finally achieved their dream and reached the pinnacle of success in professional football and the esteem of the nation's sport fans – there was a pervasive feeling of emptiness and disappointment.
4. The guys on the team had all thought that winning the big game would satisfy them, that they'd be finally happy because they'd achieved their dream.
5. It turned out not to be. Having achieved their goal and seen their dream, they realized that the dream had been too petty and the goal too low.

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6. Landry himself did not share their sense of emptiness and disappointment, because his goal had never been to win the Superbowl.
7. As a Christian, his goal had been to serve his Lord by being faithful to his vocation as a coach and serve the people around him to the best of his abilities.
8. Because he'd faithfully done that, He was content, even in the years when they hadn't won the title.

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9. Today another Superbowl will be played, and once again, a whole group of men will discover that earthly victories and titles do not satisfy.
10. You & I have the opportunity to win at the real contest of life and to find

- success in achieving greatness, not by asserting self, but by serving others.
11. If you aspire to greatness, then do not look to exalt yourself, but to exalt the Name of Jesus in humble service of others.
  12. Mother Teresa – we might not agree with all her theology, but whatever one might say – she is one who seemed to truly have grasped what Jesus said here/
    - a. she was never interested in any way with the world's forms of greatness.
    - b. in fact, she showed a extreme distaste for them.
    - c. when the world press wanted to make a celebrity of her, she flatly refused, cancelled the plans others had made for her with the rich and famous, so she could return to her humble service of the poor and needy on the streets of Calcutta.
    - d. she was never interested in the fame the world *tried* to heap on her; because their praise and admiration was something she never aspired to.
    - e. her goal was to hear one thing, and one things alone – “Well done, my good and faithful **servant**.”