

Redefining Greatness

Matthew 20:20-28

This morning we will be looking at verses 20-28 of Matthew 20. While you are turning there, I want to say that it is a privilege for me to be here with you today and open The Word with you this morning. My family and I have been so blessed by this church and the people in it for so many years. I appreciate your pastor and his faithful Bible teaching so much and was thrilled when I had the chance to fill in for him this week.

One of the things I like to do at this time of year is listen to graduation speeches. Whether it is listening to a speech in person at a graduation ceremony or seeing a politician or celebrity give one on TV, it's interesting to hear what the world has to say about success and especially about how to achieve greatness in life. One recent graduation speaker said to a graduating class: "You must knock on doors until your knuckles bleed. Doors will slam in your face. You must pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and knock again. It's the only way to achieve your goals in life." (Michael Uslan) Another had a similar message: "Just keep trying! Never give up, never, never give up! Because the only person that can stop you, is you!" (Yvonne Thorton) Last but not least, the great American philosopher, Oprah Winfrey, said: "Create the highest, grandest vision possible for your life because you become what you believe."

Their message is clear: pick yourself up off the floor, never give up, become what you believe you can. Greatness comes through achieving your goals.

As followers of Jesus Christ, how do we define greatness? Do we accept what the world says to us? Or is there something more, something different, something that makes us stand out from the world around us in the way we understand, think about, and pursue greatness.

It's an especially important question on Father's Day: Dads, how do we define greatness? Is it whoever has the highest paying job, biggest house, nicest boat-truck combination? For wives, what kind of success are you hoping your husband will achieve? The answer to this question is found in the passage we will be looking at this morning.

As we read Matthew 20:20-28, we will see three things: misunderstanding greatness, redefining greatness, and the example of greatness.

As we approach this passage we need to set the context up just a little: About to enter the final week of Jesus' life and as they traveled to Jerusalem, Jesus has been teaching His disciples on "the kingdom of God." In Chapter 18 they asked Jesus "who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In Chapter 19 Jesus said in the last judgment He, as the Son of Man, will sit on a glorious throne, and His disciples will also sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. So thoughts of kingdom, glory, and greatness are at the forefront of the disciple' minds.

But instead of grasping what Jesus has been saying, the first thing we will see in our passage today is a misunderstanding of greatness. Look at verses 20-21. These verses show us that we misunderstand greatness when we look at it as a position of power to be achieved. Verse 20 tells us that it is James' and John's mother who comes to Jesus to make the request. We know from putting together all of what the Gospels say about the family and followers of Jesus that the mother of James and John is the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

So this is actually Jesus' aunt coming to Him and asking for positions of power and influence for her sons as if by her position or her earthly relationship she will be able to secure important positions for her sons. In response to her request, Jesus says "What do you want?" Her answer is a bold request: "Say that these two sons of mine are

to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” This request clearly shows us a misunderstanding of greatness, that they believe greatness is a position of power.

Next to the king himself, the person who sits at his right and left hand would be the most powerful people in his kingdom. And these are the positions she asks for her sons. There is nothing inherently wrong with important or powerful positions. God puts skilled and capable people in those positions to accomplish His purposes.

But where the disciples misunderstand greatness is that they ask for those positions as an end to themselves. If they had asked for them as an avenue to serve and to help, the response of Jesus might have been very different. As it is, Jesus’ response shows they do not grasp what they are asking: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” The word “cup” is very significant here. In the Old Testament, “cup” usually refers to the cup of God’s wrath being poured out on sin.

Jesus understands that the time has come in His life for Him to accomplish His ultimate purpose, which is to go to the cross and take God’s punishment for sin in our place. This is the glory and greatness that is in Jesus’ mind. When the disciples say they can “drink” the cup, they do not understand what they are asking because only Jesus Christ, as the sinless sacrifice, can take the cup of God’s wrath. Jesus sees greatness in fulfilling God’s will by going to the cross. The disciples see greatness in achieving powerful positions.

Misunderstanding greatness is easy to do, isn’t it? We see people in important positions, influential positions, positions where they have influence and leadership over many others, and we think that is what greatness is. But God calls very few people to those positions.

So for us to think we have to be in those kinds of positions to be great in God’s kingdom is not what greatness really is. Misunderstanding greatness is easy. Easy for the disciples. Easy for us. But now Jesus is going to give them a new definition of greatness. This is the second point in our passage today. Jesus is going to redefine greatness, show us what it really is. He will redefine greatness by using a contrast: He will show us how the world views greatness, and how we as His followers are to view it. In verse 24 we read that the other ten disciples are angry. Not angry because James and John’s request was wrong, but angry probably because they wanted those positions of power for themselves.

Jesus calls them all together for a family sit-down. You remember those, don’t you? When Dad saw something he didn’t like and would call the whole family in for a talking to? That is what Jesus is doing here. In verse 25 Jesus points out two basic things about how worldly leaders use their greatness:

1. Rulers lord it over their people, constantly reminding people of their position and authority, using taunting, mocking, or putting others down.
2. Great ones exercise their authority by imposing their will.

There is a scene in “The Nativity Story” when the Romans come to collect taxes from the people of Nazareth, people who have almost nothing to give to the state. And when they cannot pay, they impose unthinkable penalties. This is definitely not to say that all earthly authority is evil, only to say that people in power consistently remind those not in power or position and impose themselves on the people under them.

*The big idea Jesus wants to communicate is that worldly leadership serves its own purposes;
and this is the opposite of leadership and greatness in the kingdom of God.*

Look at verse 26: “It shall not be so among you.” Greatness in the kingdom of God is completely different from

greatness as the world sees it. The two are incompatible. Jesus says we are different. Read 26-27: “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.” If we want to be great in the kingdom, become a servant. Servant is where we get the word “deacon.” It carries the idea of doing things for others rather than yourself. Whom can I serve? Where can I be a blessing? There are people all around. There are opportunities all around. Jesus says greatness in the kingdom is to seize these opportunities. Jesus then takes it one step further: If we want to become first in the kingdom, become a slave, someone who is not free to do what they wish, but only focus on the will of their master.

This is really the description of a Christian, because we are not here to do our own will, but the will of God. Ultimate greatness in God’s eyes is not a person who has achieved power, prestige, wealth, or an important position. Greatness is finding our identity in serving others and not seeing life as an opportunity to please ourselves, but to bind ourselves to the will of God and say, “I am committed at every step to the will of my master.”

After showing us what greatness is and what it is not, there is one more thing Jesus has to do: show us what greatness in action looks like. Read verse 28. The command to “be a servant or become a slave” is one that will offend many people. “Me, become a slave? I don’t think so.” To eliminate that thinking before it gets anywhere, Jesus shows Himself to be the ultimate greatest example of humble service.

To show that humble service is the path to greatness for people in all positions, Jesus begins by stating His position: The Son of Man. When Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” here in Matthew 20, He is referring back to the Old Testament, to Daniel chapter 7:

13”I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

As the Son of Man, Jesus is entitled to dominion, glory, everlasting kingdom, and to be served by all people. If there was ever anyone who could rightly reject the idea of serving or humility, it would be the ruler of the world who would have an everlasting kingdom. Although He was entitled to be served, His perspective on His position was altogether different: He knew that He had come to serve. This is true throughout Jesus’ ministry.

The gospels are almost a play-by-play account of Jesus serving. Crowds with sick people, people who are physically handicapped, people who appreciate Him, and people who despise Him. He is serving. He is the One Who is to rule the world, the universe, the One Who will be worshiped by people from every tribe and tongue and nation, serving meals, healing lepers, and reaching out to you and me.

It is Jesus’ ultimate purpose in His service that is most amazing: To give His life as a ransom for many, Jesus’ ultimate act of service, and His ultimate purpose in coming to earth was to provide an atonement for sin. A sacrifice so that, if we trust in Him by faith, we can have a right relationship with God.

What an act of service! The ultimate example of putting someone else’s cause before your own. The word “ransom” is an important one. It comes from the Greek word “lutron” and it means the amount required to purchase the freedom of a slave. It’s a great word, because before Christ set us free, we were slaves to sin. Romans 6:17 says that before Christ delivered us, we were slaves to sin. Not to say that we only sinned all the time, or that we were as sinful as we can be, but it is to say that we were unable to do anything to get out of our

sin. Because of that sin and our inability to do anything to free ourselves, our destiny was death and separation from God. Romans 5:8 says, “*But God shows his love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” The good news of the Gospel is that through Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection, we can be set free from our slavery to sin.

When we think of greatness, our desire must be to see it as God sees it. Before we can even consider being great in the kingdom, we have to ask ourselves, “Have I been served by the King?” Have you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, confessing your sin and acknowledging Him as the Lord of your life? If you haven’t, then you are separated from God and still a slave. If you have trusted Christ, do you see greatness in the same way that He does? Jesus calls us to see greatness in a way altogether different from the world. Especially for you dads, I want to encourage you to see greatness in the same way Paul did when he wrote, “*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”

It is my prayer for myself, for you as a church, and for all the dads here especially that you would be served by Jesus Christ, and that His perspective on greatness would be powerfully lived out in your lives for the glory of God.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for Your Word.

Thank You for Your Word which points us to your Son as the only hope for our lives.

Thank you, Jesus, for Your ultimate act of service on our behalf.

We did not deserve it...we did not earn it.

But in Your love and mercy You called us and You have served us.

Father, I pray that You would draw all our hearts to You, especially those who do not know You.

Help them to see Jesus Christ and His death on the cross for sin as their only hope.

For all the Dad’s here, I thank you for them. I pray that You would share Your view on greatness and serve their families humbly and sacrificially.

I pray that they would see greatness not as the world sees it, but as You see it...as service to others and submitting ourselves completely to Your will.

And I pray that in all things your Son would be glorified, and it’s in His name that we pray...Amen