

Copyright © Two Journeys Ministry

Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

www.twojourneys.org

Please use in accordance with the copyright policy found at twojourneys.org

The Measure of True Greatness

Matthew 20:20-28

Time Magazine: in an end of the century article ten years ago, it listed the one hundred greatest or most influential people of the century... that particular issue focused on the greatest minds, the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century:

- The Wright Brothers, who conquered heavier than air flight
- Alexander Fleming, who developed penicillin
- Enrico Fermi, who split the atom
- Jonas Salk, who developed an anti-polio vaccine
- Albert Einstein, who developed the general and special theories of relativity
- Robert Goddard, whose pioneering work in liquid-fueled rockets would lead to a landing on the moon a half century later
- Tim Berners-Lee, the man really responsible for the world wide web... the internet
- William Shockley, who fathered the transistor and brought the silicon to Silicon Valley

This is what passes for greatness in the eyes of the world... at least for intellectual greatness;

Other issues focused on the great achievements of politicians, military commanders, poets, architects, writers, filmmakers, musicians, industrialists, etc.

The great men and women of the world... the greatest of the millennium or the century, etc.

Amazingly, the bible does not demean this kind of inquiry... it just gives us a radically different standard for determining human greatness

Matthew 20:26-28 Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

To Jesus Christ, true human greatness came down to this: humble servanthood!
Whoever was most willing to lay himself down for the good of others would be called
greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

This standard is so simple, yet it may be the most difficult lesson any of us ever learn

I. How Not to be Great: Self-Promotion (vs. 20-21)

Matthew 20:20-21 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

A. Greatness by Self-Promotion

1. this is common in these days
2. putting yourself forward, espousing all your best attributes, selling yourself
3. however, it's been going on a long time: James and John practiced it with Jesus twenty centuries ago
4. Secular kingdoms have been dominated by this kind of politicking throughout history
 - a. In the Roman Empire, counselors to the Caesars would orchestrate political scandals for one another to knock off their rivals by shame; that failing, they might just have them poisoned; Cicero, the leading orator of the Roman republic was an expert at dirty politics—smearing an opponent with innuendo of immorality [see Anthony Everitt's book; article= "Low roads lead to Rome"]
 - b. In the European courts of the Middle Ages, Lords and Nobles would fight jousts with each other to show their courage or loyalty or military prowess, and thus jockey for position; others would go on great quests to achieve some dramatic goal in order to secure the undying affection of the King
 - c. In the modern era, the efforts have become more subtle: a bribe here, a slander there, some well-placed innuendo, a negative campaign ad, a scurrilous story in a newspaper or on a blog, and the political rival comes crashing down
 - d. The same thing happens in the corporate world as well: young ladder-climbers do so by power techniques; I was reading a summary of a book entitled "Twenty-one Dirty Tricks at Work: How to Win at Office Politics"; it discusses techniques like stealing credit for someone else's success; trapping someone in a compromising situation and then

blackmailing them; using flattery to gain someone's confidence, then backstabbing them at a key board meeting

5. So, James and John are maneuvering to get the best seats in the Kingdom

B. Actually, It was their mother who came!

1. one might see this as an act of cowardice on the part of James and John
2. interestingly, Mark's gospel doesn't mention her at all!
3. Notice that Jesus doesn't address their mother AT ALL... his comments go directly to them
4. Indications are that James and John's mother was named Salome, and was a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus (see Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25)... thus she was Jesus' aunt and James and John were Jesus' cousins
 - a. An age-old practice is the pulling of family strings... using family connections to get power and influence
 - b. Napoleon sat his brothers on thrones throughout Europe: James was King of Naples, mismanaged it badly, then was made King of Spain until he abdicated and lived in Bordentown, New Jersey; Napoleon's brother Louis was made King of Holland from 1806-1810; and his brother Jerome was King of Westphalia
 - c. So this is common... family members using their influence to gain positions of honor and power

C. The Request

Matthew 20:20-21 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

1. notice her reverence and humility: kneeling down
2. the request is even more comprehensive in Mark's Gospel

Mark 10:35-36 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

- a. Astonishing: an open-ended request
- b. We want you to do WHATEVER WE ASK!!!

- c. Some rulers prided themselves on being able to grant ANY and EVERY request... it was a show of wealth and power to do so
- d. Jesus, more than any ruler in history, was in a position of ultimate wealth and power to grant any request; but He wisely asks WHAT DO YOU WANT???

3. The request from the mother

Matthew 20:21 "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

- a. These would be the two most important positions of power in Christ's Kingdom
 - b. They would have free access to Christ, influence (so they thought) over His decisions; and with it would come immense privilege, wealth, and power
 - c. All the things that idolatrous pagans desire... power, pleasure, prestige, possessions
- D. Summary: James and John are pushing themselves forward to gain the most influential seats in Christ's Kingdom

II. Jesus' Response: Places Are Assigned by God (vs. 22-23)

A. First Response: You Don't Know What You're Asking

Matthew 20:22 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them.

- 1. Jesus strips their presumption bare
- 2. like all the other disciples, their understanding of the Kingdom is woefully inadequate
- 3. they do not understand what Christ's kingdom will be like; Nor do they understand how greatness is assessed in the Kingdom; nor do they understand what it will take to sit in those seats
- 4. So Jesus begins by exposing their ignorance plainly

B. Second Response: Can You Drink the Cup?

Matthew 20:22 "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

- 1. What cup was this???
- a. Whatever it was, it seems to be prerequisite to taking positions of honor in the kingdom

- b. Like later Medieval Kings who held out some great quest for any Knight who wanted to sit at the Round Table or have a position of influence in the Kingdom, Christ is establishing a clear challenge for these two ambitious disciples
- c. This cup was the issue... but what was the cup Christ was going to drink?
- d. In a very short time, James and John (along with Peter) would see how bitter was this cup to Jesus
- e. even Jesus Himself did not have a full sense of how infinitely bitter and deadly would be the wrath of God poured strength into the cup He would hand His Son
- f. Mark's Gospel tells us that in Gethsemane, Jesus was "astonished" by something, then fell to the ground and began begging His Father to remove the cup from Him
- g. this was clearly no light thing... but a thing of immense cost, of immense difficulty

2. James and John ignorantly assert their ability

Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?

"We can", they answered!!

- a. They didn't even know what the cup was... but they were EXTREMELY SELF-CONFIDENT
 - b. O how prideful is the human heart, and how ignorant! The only way we can survive a cup like this is by the sustaining grace of Almighty God
3. Jesus promises their future suffering... but not their future glory
- a. They would drink FROM Jesus' cup, but they would not drink the cup itself
 - b. Christ's cup itself was the cup of God's wrath for the sins of the world... only Jesus could drink that one
 - c. BUT all of His true followers do indeed drink FROM Christ's cup... the cup of human rejection, persecution, and suffering administered by those who hate God and all of His followers
 - d. A few drops of suffering, a few bitter moments of misery by a Christ-hating world
 - i) James would be put to death with the sword by the evil King Herod in Acts 12, the first of the Twelve Apostles to die as a martyr

- ii) John would outlive them all, but would drink from Jesus' cup of suffering in other ways: according to church tradition, he was boiled in oil in Ephesus, but miraculously spared; then exiled to the Isle of Patmos after much suffering as a faithful witness of Christ

e. so James and John would indeed drink FROM Christ's cup of suffering

4. HOWEVER...

C. Third Response: Those Places are Assigned by my Father

Matthew 20:23 Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

1. Christ leaves them in the dark about their final positions in the Kingdom; the degrees of honor and glory that would be commended to them
2. He does not deny that someone will sit on His right hand, and someone else will sit on His left; but He defers as in all things to the final authority of His heavenly Father
3. note the word "prepared": the Kingdom is taking shape under the sovereign hand of Almighty God
 - a. the seats of honor at Christ's right and left hands are "prepared" by the Father
 - b. So also the people themselves are "prepared" for the seats they will take
4. So... there will be places of honor—Christ wants us to know that; what He does now is to educate us all on HOW they will be given out; on what BASIS are seats of honor assigned in the Kingdom of Heaven

III. How Greatness is Assessed in the Kingdom (vs. 24-28)

Matthew 20:24-28 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

A. Feelings of Indignation

1. the ten disciples heard what they two brothers had done and they were INDIGNANT

2. the Greek word means “annoyed” or “irritated” and is used of a baby’s teething pains; the other ten apostles, though themselves every bit as ambitious and prideful as these two brothers, were still indignant
3. amazing how pride was corrupting all of these relationships: the lust for power was precisely what brought Satan down, when he yearned to ascend to the utmost position in heaven and take God’s place
4. Christ MUST deal with this sordid ambition RIGHT NOW
5. Sadly, this stinkweed of sin has DEEP ROOTS in human nature... He’s already dealt with it in Matthew 18, when they were arguing about which of them was the greatest and he had a little child stand among them; He would deal with it AGAIN the night of the Last Supper and of His agony in Gethsemane; in the upper room, they would argue that very night about which of them was the greatest!! So Jesus washed their feet, humbling Himself like a slave; how stubborn is this selfish pride, this self-glory!!

B. Christ Assembles His Future Leaders: “**Jesus called them together...**”

1. these men would chart the course for the church; twenty centuries (at least) of church history would get its start by the ministry of these vital men
2. As He would soon tell Pontius Pilate, Jesus’ Kingdom is “not of this world”: His servants will not fight outsiders with the sword, neither will they fight insiders with dirty politics and filthy ambitions

C. Lesson by Contrast

Matthew 20:25-26 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you.

1. Jesus is here speaking of the glories of Gentile rulers and kings and lofty officials;
 - a. they had seen it with King Herod, who was actually not Jewish but a Gentile usurper
 - b. they had seen it with a series of Gentile empires that had ruled Jerusalem since the Exile to Babylon: the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, the Romans
 - c. all of them lived for power, and for the trappings of power
2. “Lord it over them” and “exercise authority over them”; this has to do with the MOTIVE and MANNER of Gentile rule

- a. MOTIVE: self-glory, even in some cases self-deifications (Greek King Antiochus IV, who ruled over Jerusalem two centuries before Christ) called himself “The Manifest One”, a claim to deity; so also the Caesars made similar claims to deity—Octavius, called Caesar Augustus, the title “Augustus” implies deity; all of these arrogant Gentile Kings were driven by pride and ambition, and they truly believed in their inherent superiority to those they ruled; SO ALSO their underlings... governors like Pontius Pilate
- b. MANNER: there are outward displays of power and prestige; trumpets sounding the approach of the Roman governor, regal purple banners fluttering in the air; a manner of superiority in their speech, the haughty air; like Marie Antionette’s cavalier attitude toward the starving poor of France, “Let them eat cake”... so these rulers and officials love the places of honor, the most important seats, the lofty greetings, the words of praise, the trappings of POWER

Louis XIV, the “Sun King” of France, built the Palace of Versailles, with the most elaborate displays of wealth, of golden frameworks, of imbedded jewels in the fireplaces and crystal chandeliers, of lavish artwork and mirrors—a whole hall of mirrors—to give the visiting dignitaries from other nations AS WELL AS his own people a sense of their inferiority and subordination

So... the rulers of the Gentiles LORD IT OVER people, and their high officials EXERCISE AUTHORITY over them

3. NOT SO WITH YOU... My Kingdom will NOT carry itself like that!!

So... how WOULD greatness be measured in Christ’s coming Kingdom?

D. How Greatness is Measured in the Kingdom

Matthew 20:26-28 Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

1. Ambition for Heavenly Glory is NOT Evil... Jesus Simply Redirects It

- a. Alright you ambitious men: do you want to be GREAT? I will show you what to do!!
- b. Do you want to be FIRST? I will show you how much harder that will be!
- c. If a desire for heavenly glory were bad, Jesus would have said so... instead He shows what manner of life here on earth He will reward in heaven

2. Greatness in the Kingdom earned by SERVANTHOOD

- a. Humble yourself now
 - b. Stop living for yourself, your earthly advantages, your earthly pleasures, your earthly prestige and power and glory
 - c. Deny yourself daily, and make yourself nothing, and meet the temporal and eternal needs of OTHERS
 - d. And when you have achieved genuine servanthood and want still more, go EVEN LOWER
3. Highest (“first”) position: earned by SLAVERY
- a. The servant = “diakonos”; a diakonos did menial labor in a house—scrubbing floors, cleaning rooms, waiting tables like a tablewaiter, living to see that others have enough food to eat, enough to drink, that their bodies are comfortable and all their needs met
 - b. The slave = doulos; even lower in society; a diakonos was more like an employee, who owned himself and could come and go as he pleased; but a doulos (a slave) did NOT own himself and could only come and go at his master’s command; he was bought at a price and was owned by the master
 - c. So in effect Jesus is describing a DOWNWARD JOURNEY to greatness for the leaders of His church

This is what Jesus Himself has done

IV. Jesus the Greatest in the Kingdom (vs. 28)

Matthew 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

A. Christ’s Example of Humble Servanthood

- 1. “Just as the Son of Man...”
 - a. Christ is the prime example of meek, lowly servanthood
 - b. So he traveled the downward journey better than anyone of them ever would

B. In His Motive for Everything

- 1. Christ’s motive in entering the world was not selfish, but selfless

he came not to be served but to serve...

- a. This statement describes Christ's motive, His purpose
- b. It shows His heart: He wasn't looking for anyone to wait on Him hand and foot, to bring Him drinks, to get Him a new robe or fawn over Him with words of praise
- 2. Having indescribable power and wealth and comfort and praise, He left it all behind... He took off His robes of glory, He arose from the seat of power, He left behind the center of adulation and praise from the archangels and angels and living creatures
- 3. His motive was LOVE... His motive was to bless others, and lift others up out of the muckpile of sin, to cleanse them and bring joy to their lives and give them a place in heaven
- 4. that was His MOTIVE

C. In His Incarnation

- 1. The Son of Man CAME...
- 2. Christ entered the earth, took on a human body, the very nature of a servant: that's what human beings were designed to be and to do: to SERVE the living God
- 3. So Christ refers to His incarnation: and what a picture of humility; a weak, helpless infant, born to a penniless Jewish couple, in a borrowed stable, laid in a manger, where the barnyard animals feed

D. In His Life and Ministry

- 1. Having entered the world so humbly, He continued His downward journey
- 2. He submitted perfectly to the Law of God, and obeyed His parents; though we have no details of His submission to them, yet we can well imagine Jesus taking orders from Joseph in the carpentry shop, doing as He was told... though He was Joseph's God, Joseph's Creator and King and Ruler and Judge... yet He humbled Himself and did his bidding, obeyed His commands
- 3. When it came time for Jesus to begin His earthly ministry, He did so in the most humble manner imaginable: submitting to John's Baptism of repentance, though He'd committed no sin;

We must fulfill all righteousness he told John... what a humble, meek, lowly man we see, bowing His holy head under the waters of a baptism for repentance, identifying Himself with the worst sinners imaginable as though He were one of them

4. Ministry:

- a. Healing huge crowds of people... doing whatever they wanted Him to
- b. See how humbly he serves, pouring out His entire day's energies for the benefits of others
- c. See how humbly He rises to go and heal the centurion's servant

Matthew 8:6-7 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." ⁷ Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

- d. And Jairus's daughter

Matthew 9:18-19 a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹ Jesus got up and went with him

- e. It seemed anyone and everyone could impinge on His time... and never once did He murmur, never once did He lord it over anyone, claiming "Do you know who I am?" He never demanded worship, or forced people to speak to Him with titles of honor
- f. Jesus, the Son of Man, was the Servant of ALL: feeding the five thousand, raising the widow's son from the dead, caring for the needs of countless blind, paralyzed, fevered, leprous, demon-possessed people
- g. Culminating in washing His disciples' feet
 - i) Taking off His outer robe... a picture of His laying aside His heavenly glory
 - ii) He gets up from His seat at the Last Supper, wraps a towel around His waist, and takes the lowest position imaginable, washing the filthy feet of these men who were arguing about which of them was the greatest

E. In His Death

Matthew 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

- 1. BUT the ultimate servanthood was this: His substitutionary death on the cross was the greatest act of humble servanthood in history
- 2. Here Christ asserts that He entered the world PRIMARILY to lay down His life as a substitutionary ransom for many
 - a. His death was no accident... it was the very purpose of His entering the world

- b. Christ came to serve to the uttermost, to meet the greatest need with the greatest cost, the greatest sacrifice: His OWN LIFE
- 3. this is the measure of greatness: the death of Christ on the cross
- 4. the theology of the atonement: “to give His life as a ransom for many”
 - a. the word “ransom” means the payment of a price; sometimes the word is used to refer to money paid to rescue prisoners of war, or money paid to get slaves out of their servitude: MONEY PAID TO GET SOMEONE OUT OF TROUBLE
 - b. along with this it is striking that Jesus life is the RANSOM and it is paid literally “INSTEAD OF” many... in the place of, is the Greek word “anti”... this clearly teaches SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT
 - c. Christ’s life was forfeit, paid out to rescue many from their distress
 - d. some medieval theologians misunderstood the word “ransom” and thought Jesus was paying a ransom to the devil: nothing could be farther from the truth
 - e. the devil is a created being who stands in no position of power over the Son of God
 - f. rather the ransom is paid to God to satisfy His claims of justice over our sinful lives

Genesis 2:17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

Ezekiel 18:4 the soul who sins shall die.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death

Christ came to pay the debt of many sinners... to give His life in their place, to lay down His life as a RANSOM in the place of MANY

Isaiah 53:5-6 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

F. Therefore... He IS the Greatest [The Position has been filled...]

- 1. in context, then, Christ is offering His own birth, life, ministry, and especially DEATH as a ransom for many as the PRIME EXAMPLE of the attitude that must characterize the great ones of His Kingdom

2. if you want to be great in my Kingdom, be the servant of many; if you want to be FIRST be the slave of all
3. BUT we should understand that the position of “GREATEST in the Kingdom” has already been given—and it is Jesus!!

V. Application

A. Be Alert to Your Pride

1. recognize how prevalent is our wretched pride
 - a. we are constantly preferring ourselves, thinking ourselves worthy of greater honors
 - b. we look down on others and get indignant if it seems they have received some great honor
 - c. now is the time for us to search out our pride and KILL IT
 - d. begin to walk with the Holy Spirit through your heart as displayed by your thoughts, actions, and attitudes throughout the day
 - e. ask the Lord to show you the ways in which you have acted pridefully throughout the day; in which you have behaved like the rulers of the Gentiles, lording it over someone

B. Be Ready to Drink from Jesus' Cup

1. There are two ways to drink from Jesus' cup of suffering
 - a. Suffering temptation without yielding... suffering the battles of personal holiness

Hebrews 2:18 he himself suffered when he was tempted, and he is able to help those who are being tempted

- b. Suffering persecution at the hands of a Christ-hating world
 - i) Paul said

2 Timothy 3:12 everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

- ii) Hebrews says:

Hebrews 13:12-13 Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

2. The more faithful we are in each, the more bitterness we may drink from Christ's cup... and the more worthy we will be found on Judgment Day

C. Understand the Places of Honor in the Kingdom

1. not everyone will be equally honored on Judgment Day
2. not everyone will sit equally closely to Christ in heaven; someone is going to sit at Jesus' right, and someone else at his left
3. there are greater and lesser places of honor in the Kingdom
4. the more faithfully, humbly and courageously we serve in this world, the greater will be our honor in the next
5. YET remember also: simply being there, in heaven, in a resurrection body, with a place at the banquet table of the Lamb will be eternally satisfying

D. Understand the Path of True Servanthood

1. To serve another means to put their needs ahead of your own
2. it is to consider others as better than yourself
3. it is to deny yourself and take up the basin and towel and do a dirty job to benefit someone else
4. it is the HARDEST thing for a prideful sinner to do
5. it is also the thing that God will HONOR the MOST on Judgment Day
6. Throughout your daily lives learn the path of humble servanthood
 - a. Give the seats of honor to others; let others go first; ask first what someone else needs
 - b. Talk less, listen more
 - c. Be an encourager, find ways to build others up for their deeds
 - d. Find the job that no one wants to do and do it cheerfully
7. the real test of servanthood: when someone arrogantly treats you like a servant

Three key areas of servanthood:

- 1) With your money: make some sacrifice in your daily lifestyle so you can give more money to the benevolence offering of the church... every Lord's Supper, we take a benevolence offering for needs in the church and in the community; we have had

more needs, especially in the church, than ever before. SERVE OTHERS by denying yourself and saving some money; let's see the next benevolence offering be the highest we've ever had.

- 2) With your prayers: get two prayer lists from the church and spend time every day lifting up the requests. Pray for the main church prayer list we use every Wednesday; and get the list that Keegan Callanan puts together every week for the missionaries we are "holding the ropes for"... serve those missionaries by sacrificing some of your time and earnestly praying for their needs
- 3) With your spiritual gifts: every spiritual gift is a special ability given by God designed to meet some human need; teaching, giving, serving, administration, faith, etc. all of these gifts are essentially patterns of ministry—of SERVICE—to others; do you have a ministry??? If you do not have a regular pattern of ministry here at FBC, it may be that you have a problem with SERVANTHOOD, with laying down your own rights and advantages to meet the needs of others. Meditate on this passage and allow Christ to make you a servant

E. Honor Christ for His Humility

Philippians 2:6-11 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.