



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
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**What Kind of Greatness?**  
**Matthew 20:20-28**

Greatness is in these days. Athletes want to be great. Politicians want to be great. Business people want to be great. Businesses and schools and organizations and even churches want to be great. Maybe that's why one of the hottest books in corporate and educational administration circles some years ago was Jim Collins' *Good to Great*.<sup>1</sup>

If we're honest, we all probably have to admit that in some way, we long to be great. It's really quite natural, since we humans tend to desire recognition—to be thought of as being important in *some way to someone*.

We usually define greatness in terms of our human relationships. We compare ourselves with our peers to see if we're above or below them in our social status or achievements. Often we're more concerned about being *greater than* our rivals than being truly great! So we end up defining greatness along the lines of our station in life or what we've accumulated, accomplished or achieved.

But what does it mean to be great in the kingdom of God? For us as followers of Jesus, *what kind of greatness* does His kingly rule demand?

***A major contrast***

To understand what Jesus is saying in this text, it's important to consider the context of this conversation with His disciples.

"Jesus was going up to Jerusalem." On the way, He pulled His twelve disciples away from the larger group over to one side, and began to tell them—to warn them—about what was going to happen to Him there (20:17-19).<sup>2</sup>

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

Now you'd think that this kind of statement by Jesus would have disturbed the disciples. They knew by now that when He said "Son of Man," He meant Himself. This was *the* Old Testament term He preferred to use to describe Himself. Sometimes in the Old Testament, the phrase simply meant "human being." But in a few crucial instances, like Daniel 7, it had a special technical meaning as it described a heavenly deliverer who would be the Savior of God's people.

But what He said about the Son of Man went right over their heads. Now I'd like to think that if I had heard Him say something like that, I would've tried to comfort Him or encourage Him or

cheer Him up or something!

Well, James and John did do *something*. They had their mother to *ask* Jesus for something. It was no doubt a calculated strategy—how could Jesus turn down their dear mother’s request?

She came, knelt before Him and told Him she had a request. Jesus responded, “What is it you want?” (20:21).

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom” (20:21).

Can you imagine that? Here Jesus has just told them what’s going to happen to Him when they get to Jerusalem. He’s going to be betrayed, tortured, and killed, and she’s worried about who’s going to have the seats of highest honor when He comes into His glory! You don’t have to read between the lines too much to see that her boys had instigated this request, because Jesus responded directly to James and John.

Now along with Simon Peter, they had already gotten a glimpse of Jesus’ glory—on the mountain, when He was transfigured before them (17:1-13). For one brief fleeting moment, they had seen “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” just as Jesus had predicted in Matthew 16:28. They had Jesus’ glory on their minds. They had seen it; they had tasted it.

And they had heard Jesus declare in 19:28 that when He, the Son of Man, would sit on His glorious throne in the new age, His twelve disciples would also “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” But James and John didn’t just want a piece of the action; they wanted the best seats in the house!

They wanted to be the top dogs, the Teacher’s pets. They had totally missed what Jesus said before! They wanted to have the seats of highest honor when Jesus enters His kingdom glory for good! They were saying, “We want everybody to know You think more of us than anybody else, that we’re more important to You than anybody else, that You regard us more highly than anybody else!”

Jesus told them, “You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” (20:22). The cup was His suffering and death—His Passion—that He was facing.

Without really knowing what they were saying, they said, “We can.”

Jesus told 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” (20:23).

The truth is that for all Jesus’ teaching about it, they still didn’t understand what the kingdom of God is like. When Jesus talked about the kingdom and thrones and ruling and judging, they thought in terms of human rulers and kingdoms, especially the Roman rule that they hated and longed to be delivered from so much.

Now the other ten disciples couldn’t help but overhear this conversation. As you might imagine, they were *not* happy. In fact, they were *indignant*! So Jesus gathered them all together and said,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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” (20:25-28).

You see, they were defining greatness in terms of their relationships, in terms of who was most important or most valuable in relation to one another. That was common to their culture, just as it is in ours. They were thinking like the world around them.

But before we're too hard on them, shouldn't we ask ourselves if we're not like them—understanding greatness as the culture around us does, in terms of importance, power, prestige, and possessions—while we *neglect* the sufferings of our Lord? For us, the “great ones” are usually the world's heroes, the star athletes, television and movie stars, the rich, the powerful, or the famous. Don't we have the same kinds of misconceptions the Twelve did, just cast in modern or postmodern terms? Like Jesus' disciples, we often misunderstand what kind of greatness His kingdom calls for from us.

### ***What kingdom greatness looks like***

When Jesus told His disciples: “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (20:26-27), what did He mean? Simply this: Kingdom greatness involves *freely choosing to relate to others as last in the relationship rather than first, as the servant rather than as the dominating, domineering figure.*

This was a complete reversal of the world's idea!

I mean, think about it. To be the slave is to put yourself last. To put yourself last means to put *everyone* else ahead of yourself. To be the servant of all means to minister to others rather than to take advantage of them, to be at their service rather than to manipulate or control them for your own benefit or gain.

In the kingdom of God, greatness looks like humble, unselfish service to others.

Somewhere in his writings, T. W. Manson said: “In the kingdom of God, service is not a stepping stone to nobility; it *is* nobility, the only kind of nobility that is recognized.”

That's *exactly* what Jesus was talking about here. And He gave them and us the basis for and ultimate example of this kind of attitude: “just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:28).

Think about that—the eternal Son of God, second Person of the Holy Trinity, sharing eternally and equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the essence of the Godhead as one God in three Persons, *became a servant* and gave His life “as a ransom for many.” Paul put it so beautifully in Philippians 2:6-8 (RSV).

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

That's what He did for us.

And that's where the rubber meets the road. *If we're to be great in Jesus' kingdom, we must learn to be the servant of all and the slave of all!* We're not just to be concerned about the important people around us. We're to be concerned with *everyone*, from the most important person in the community to the least!

That may mean ministering to the poor or needy or sick or grieving or mentally ill or addicted. It may mean ministering to the “down-and-out” or the “up-and-out.” It may mean taking an interest in a child or a youth who needs a positive adult in his or her life. It may mean

our church resuming some type of after-school program to minister to at-risk children and their families.

Whatever the case, it will mean being a servant, both individually and corporately as a church, just as Jesus came to serve! It will mean seeking to serve rather than to be served!

I have read somewhere that St. Francis de Sales once said, “Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us.”

Oswald Chambers once said that “There are no such things as prominent service and obscure service; it is all the same with God.”<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus put it the most clearly and powerfully:

whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,  
and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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” (20:25-28).

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (1984 edition).

<sup>3</sup> Oswald Chambers, *So Send I You* (Discovery House, 1993);  
<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/february/12879.html> (accessed 3/29/2017).