

## *Greatness Defined*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 17, 2020.

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.” Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 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, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:17–28).<sup>1</sup>

What is greatness? Someone told me once that he couldn’t define greatness, but he would know it when he saw it. Is greatness then relative? Is it subjective, defined by individual perception? According to one dictionary, greatness is the “quality of being great, distinguished, or eminent.”<sup>2</sup> But who defines great? By what standard is someone or something distinguished? What determines eminence?

We are not without God’s Word on this matter. Scripture reveals that there are essentially two definitions of greatness, the worldly and the heavenly. Because this world is under the influence of the evil one, we may expect that the world’s definition of greatness would differ significantly from the heavenly. And yet, even children of the kingdom of heaven are often enticed by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

This should surprise no one. We are constantly bombarded with the world’s standard of greatness. Whether it be wealth, power, or influence, we are conditioned to value it in our hearts and minds. If you don’t believe me, then explain why I hear Christians quoting movie stars on a number of social issues? If you don’t believe me, then explain why we will give credence to a rich man’s words over a poor man’s? Why will we believe the lies of the powerful and ignore the truth of the factual? We know worldly greatness when we see it, because this is the world in which we live. But for the child of the kingdom of heaven, by God’s grace through faith in Christ, our definition of greatness is not dictated by lucifer but by the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> “Greatness,” Lexico, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/greatness>.

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Consider the example of James and John, and their passionate advocate, their mother. They are travelling to Jerusalem, the royal city. For a third time, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, but his disciples have either not listened, do not understand, or have heard what they want to hear clouded by presumption. Whatever the case, they are confident that Jesus as the Messiah will soon reign as the King of Israel. It is likely that they have misunderstood Jesus' revelation to the disciples that "when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). Perhaps they thought those thrones awaited them in Jerusalem. They are marching to Jerusalem, and so the time to lobby for position is now, lest Peter secure a more prominent position.

The strategy of these ambitious young men is brilliant: employ mom. Who can say "no" to mom? And so, at the opportune moment, the wife of Zebedee petitions Jesus, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." She wants James and John to be second in command, vice-regents over the kingdom. It's so bold that it's humorous. She wants only the best for her boys, who have followed Jesus from the beginning, and now it's time for their reward: greatness in the kingdom.

The ambition of the Zebedees leaves the other disciples indignant. Who does this? Who lobbies for kingdom authority through their mom? Or, are the disciples merely envious? Where are their moms at an opportunist time like this? Can you blame James and John? As Andrew Carnegie said, "while the law of competition may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department." As competitors, James and John are merely crushing the competition on the road to greatness. One major problem: they are pursuing greatness according to the world.

Jesus responds to this tense situation in two ways. First, he explains to James and John, "You do not know what you are asking." Clearly, they have revealed their ignorance, not only about greatness but also about Jesus' purpose and the kingdom of heaven. He who just told them that he will be condemned, mocked, flogged, and crucified, asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" To the ears of the ambitious, I would imagine this question sounded like a test of loyalty rather than one of self-examination. As if to say: Do you think you are up to the challenge? They believe that they are: "We are able."

Interestingly, Jesus does not reject or confront their bravado but instead foretells, "You will drink my cup..." In fact, James would be the first of the apostles to be martyred, executed by the sword of King Herod (Acts 12:2). John would be exiled to the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). They would indeed live for Christ and drink his cup of suffering in death. Neither disciple knows this at the time of course, but what they do know is that what has been requested is beyond their comprehension. God has ordained all authority in heaven and earth, including authority in the kingdom of heaven. What becomes apparent to the brothers (and to us the reader) is that God's ways are far beyond anything we can imagine (Isa. 55:8 NLT).

There is a second way that Jesus responds to James and John and the remaining indignant disciples, and it is in this response that Jesus reveals the difference between worldly and heavenly greatness. According to Jesus, greatness is not arrogant authority but humble

submission, not self-preserving but willing sacrifice, not self-serving but serving others. This is greatness defined, defined by the Son of God.

### **Humble Submission**

Jesus explains to his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.” Jesus says, “You know...,” but how do they know this? They know, and we know, because this is the way of the world. Jesus’ use of the title “Gentiles” as a general term meaning the people of this world.

Those who have worldly authority often do not acknowledge the One who ordains authority. They do not see themselves as stewards of God’s common grace but use their authority to “lord” or “exercise dominion” (KJV) over their subjects. There is, as one commentator describes it, a human “pecking order,” and it is part of this life in this world, whether it be on the playground, in the workplace, or in the family. James and John and their mother understand this well. Why let Peter seemingly rise to a position of prominence in the kingdom when you have the sons of Zebedee ready, willing, and able?

“It shall not be so among you,” Jesus says. The way of the kingdom of heaven is different than the way of the world. Rather than arrogant authority, greatness is defined by humble submission. Rather than jockeying for positions of authority, the disciples are to humbly submit to one another, as are we as Christ’s disciples. We are to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). This does not mean a mutual submission in which there is no authority but rather an attitude of humility for one another in love for Christ’s sake. Life in the church is not a competition or a popularity contest. We are not lobbying for seats of honor, because we *all* have a seat at the Lord’s table.

The perfect example of humble submission is the Lord Jesus Christ. He who is the eternal second Person of the Trinity, willingly humbled himself to his Father’s authority. As Jesus explained to the Zebedees, “to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those whom it has been prepared by my Father.” In fact, all of Jesus’ earthly ministry was a ministry of humble submission to his Father: “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30).

Therefore, greatness is characterized by humble submission which is perfectly exemplified in Christ Jesus. It is in his life and death that we look for greatness defined. And, all who are in Christ are to have this mind, which is ours in Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

### **Willing Sacrifice**

Greatness, as Jesus defines it, is not self-preserving but willing sacrifice. Jesus explains that “whoever should be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among

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you must be your slave.” Greatness, Jesus says, is being a servant. The Greek word translated “servant” is *diakonos*, which is the same word translated “deacon.” Context determines whether the word refers to the church officer, but here it is clearly referring to one who serves. In its verb form it means “doing things for other people rather than oneself,”<sup>3</sup> or sacrificial service.

Likewise, being first place, Jesus says, is being a slave. The Greek word translated slave, *doulos*, was the lowest social status in Jewish society. A slave had no rights. Their sole existence was to serve their master and his household.

Jesus chooses these two words to define greatness: a servant and a slave. Contrary to the ambitions of James and John to achieve greatness, Jesus points them to the role of a servant, to the life of a slave. They are to be ambitious in their submission and service, willingly sacrificing their rights for the sake of Christ.

The greatest example of willing sacrifice is the Lord Jesus. Jesus was not manipulated or coerced in going to the cross, rather it was “the joy that was set before him [that] he endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). Taking our sin and judgment upon himself, he became “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2 NIV). Jesus teaches us, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13), and indeed he did, defining greatness in himself. Greatness is not about self-preserving but willing sacrifice, becoming a “slave of God” (Rom. 6:22). And it is in this love for God and neighbor that we learn to serve others.

### **Serving Others**

As the greatest, Jesus submits himself as the example of greatness: “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In contrast to the self-serving agenda of the Zebedees, Jesus explains that he came to serve. Just as love is telling of authentic Christianity (John 13:35) so also is serving others, looking not only to our own interests but the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). In fact, the freedom we enjoy in Christ is to be exercised through love in serving one another (Gal. 5:13).

Of course, this is counter cultural. You and I are inundated with the message that my rights are more important than your rights, especially if we disagree. Our children are taught not to let anything (or anyone) get in the way of their dreams. We increasingly witness that the way we may achieve what we want is to demonize everyone that gets in our way.

How quickly, we as Christians, forget the example of Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve.” The ultimate example of this is his atoning death on the cross, in which he became “a ransom,” the perfect satisfaction for the sins of his people. As Jesus told his disciples, so it happened. He went up to Jerusalem. He was delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and though innocent he was condemned to death. Delivered over to Pontius Pilate, he was mocked, then flogged, then crucified on a Roman cross. And on the third day, he was raised from the dead, conquering sin and death.

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<sup>3</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 760.

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Jesus is in his perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection, greatness defined. We look to him in faith to be saved from our sin and death. And, as Christians, we look to him, through the help of his indwelling Spirit, to live lives of Christ-like greatness, in humble submission, willing sacrifice, and serving others.