

## **Introduction**

The question of greatness—what it is and how to be great—is a question in which the world is keenly interested. Most people have a drive to achieve some sort of greatness. They want to run a great business, have a great family, achieve a position of great power and influence. Society tends to look to honor people it considers great. They construct statues and paint portraits and turn mountains into sculptures. And what with the vandalism and destruction of statues from people of the past, the times in which we are living demonstrate that ideas of greatness differ from generation to generation and from people group to people group. Is there a standard of greatness that transcends and supercedes all others? Yes, indeed, there is. We find it in our text this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

Jesus's disciples James and John were also his cousins. Their mother Salome was the sister of Jesus's mother Mary. Along with her two sons, Salome approached Jesus to seek for the two highest seats of greatness in his kingdom. The exchange Jesus had with the three of them and the instruction which followed reveal the nature of greatness from the only perspective that matters. As we comb through the conversation, we see the Son of God setting forth a bold portrait of greatness in the kingdom of God. And this is the main idea in this text—what it truly means to be great. The portrait as painted by Jesus provides six characteristics of true greatness. The portrait he provides is vastly different from what we find in the world and from what we naturally think.

### **I. Kingdom Greatness Does Not Seek Selfish Honor**

A. When Salome approached Jesus, there was a display of honor and respect and humility. Matthew tells us that she came and kneeled before Jesus. But the odd thing here is that she was ultimately not giving glory to Christ but seeking glory from Christ. She was seeking it for herself by seeking it for her two boys. Who does not like to be in a position of recognition, power, and honor? And who does not like to be able to say that their child holds a position of recognition, power, and honor?

Every human being has a selfish sinful nature, and we naturally think highly of ourselves. We tend to think much of the wrongs of others and little of our own sins. We tend to magnify our own accomplishments and diminish those of others. Sacrifices we make appear much larger to us than similar sacrifices made by others. We tend to get all bent out of shape over the minor offenses of others and ignore the major sins of which we are guilty. And as we see here with the trio that approached Jesus, we just tend to think that we deserve more and better than others. And we are not ashamed to ask for it. We tend to seek selfish honor. Or maybe we have the restraint not to ask for it, but when others ask for it, we become indignant, like the other ten disciples.

Back in the day I was with a group of guys. Five of us were heading off campus on a little road trip in a small car. Getting in the back was going to be squished. One of the fellas said, "I call shotgun!" On the outside we laughed but on my inside was a spike of resentment. I thought to myself, "How rude! How selfish!" But the same sentiments were in my heart. I only thought that way because I wanted to ride shotgun too.

We tend to think much of our condition and desires and little of the condition and desires of others. If I want it then I am entitled to try to get it. If others try to get it before me, then I am resentful.

This tendency is the fruit of the sinful human nature. Here is a heart that is deceitful and desperately sick. It is blind to its own selfishness. This is the opposite of kingdom greatness.

To pursue kingdom greatness, we must reject self-absorption in favor of the consideration of others. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Love does not seek its own;" to the Philippians, "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." Peter tells wives to submit humbly and husbands to be understanding of their wives and to treat them with honor. Kingdom greatness determines to arrest those selfish impulses to consider myself and my desires and my honor first. It considers others more important. Kingdom greatness does not seek selfish honor.

The second characteristic we see is that . . .

## **II. Kingdom Greatness Soberly Submits to Suffering**

A. Watch the reply of Jesus to this self-seeking request. "You do not know what you are asking." Not only were these three self-seeking, they were unaware of the path to the recognition and honor they desired. They did not realize that the path to the highest honor in the kingdom of heaven is the path of complete self-denial and great suffering. "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" The cup of which Jesus is speaking is the cup of his suffering. He had just been speaking to the disciples of the fact that going up to Jerusalem he would be delivered over to condemnation, mockery, flogging, and crucifixion. This was the cup about which Jesus was to pray, "My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me." The suffering was to be horrific but Jesus's resolve was steadfast. These disciples really were not accepting Jesus's coming death and suffering. And they were certainly not anticipating that they would suffer. They would be threatened and they would suffer greatly.

But first they would be shown that in themselves they were NOT able. When Jesus was arrested they all left him. In fear they scattered. They were not as ready and able as they had thought. But they did suffer. James was the first apostle to be martyred. He was beheaded by Herod. Meanwhile, John outlived the other apostles. It was told by early church father Tertullian that John survived being placed in boiling oil before being exiled to the island of Patmos to finish out his days in a lonely deserted place.

Jesus warned his disciples and he warns us that the world's hatred of him would be directed to his followers as well. He said, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

The path to the highest honor in the kingdom is the path of the greatest suffering for the kingdom. The world thinks great the ones who escape suffering and experience popular adulation and applause. But Christ warns and prepares us for the fact that true kingdom greatness will be despised by the world. So we need to be ready to suffer. We must not be naive and think that we can follow Christ faithfully and be applauded by the world. Nor must we think that the highest recognition in the kingdom comes to any but those who suffer the greatest for the sake of the kingdom.

We see a third characteristic . . .

## **III. Kingdom Greatness Leaves the Seating to the Father.**

Jesus instructs James, John, and their mother that God has already configured the seating plan in the kingdom. God the Father is the planner. He is the one who planned in time past to redeem fallen sinners. He chose by his electing grace the very ones who will come to faith in Christ. And he has already marked out the places of honor in the kingdom. Therefore it is not something that the citizens of the kingdom need to worry about.

Do not seek honor, power, and recognition. It is out of your hands. It is out of Christ's hands. Jesus later rebuked the scribes and Pharisees because they loved the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues. He also taught that when you go to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor but sit in the lowest place and let the host bestow honor on you and tell you to move up. He concluded, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. When you seek a place of honor, you exalt yourself, but when you leave the seating chart to God, you are leaving the exalting to him. Your focus and mine is to be on the serving and on the suffering. Leave the rewarding to God.

If your heart is like mine and I know it is—we have the same forefather, Adam—then we will be tempted to seat ourselves in the higher place. We will want people to know what we have done, how we have suffered, how we ought to be thanked for our sacrifice and hard work. We will be tempted to become indignant when we do not receive the recognition our hearts tell us we deserve. Just remember that if we get our recognition here from men and if we do what we do in order to be recognized, that is the extent of the recognition we will get. Remember what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount. When you give to the needy, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. When you pray, go into your closet. When you fast, keep it to yourself. And your father who sees in secret will reward you. When you do what you do for the kingdom, it is not about your being recognized. But when you forfeit recognition, God is pleased and glorified.

Characteristic Number 4 . . .

#### **IV. Kingdom Greatness Does Not Seek a Place of Dominance**

Jesus turns to all the disciples and he begins to instruct them as to the nature of greatness. The first thing he says is that greatness is not being in charge. "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." Do you doubt that Jesus had his finger on the pulse of the world? Not at all. This is the way it is. People want to be in charge. And in the system of this world, the more in charge you are, the greater you are. That is what being great is for, being in charge. And in the world the path to the place of being in charge is by gaining charge. You fight hard and you exalt yourself. Humility does not usually take you far in politics.

It is really important that Christ-followers hear what Jesus is saying. He is taking his followers out of this world, but it is hard to get the world out of us, especially in the way we think about leading. Jesus jumped to talk about positions of authority in the world. There greatness is associated with the exercise of that authority. And when Jesus says it is not to be so among you, he is intimating that even for those in positions of authority, being great is not about the exertion of that authority. It is not about being in charge and getting to say what goes that makes one great.

There is a group of people in particular which I believe need to hear what Jesus is saying. That group is Christian men and in particular Christian husbands in relation to their wives. It is not infrequent through the years that I encounter husbands who seem to think that their primary role as head is to be in charge. It is great to be the husband because you get to say what goes. You get to rule the thermostat, the remote, and the finances. You go off and do your work and come home and sit on the couch and tell everybody what to do. If you experience resistance from your wife, well, she is just being disobedient and it is your job to get her into shape. This picture may be a bit exaggerated in most situations, but it is right down the line in others.

Listen, the Bible does say that the husband is the head. And authority is involved in headship. Wives are told to submit. However, headship does not mean dominance. It does not mean coercion. Nowhere are husbands directed to force their wives to submit. Now, among the authority structures which God's word sets forth there are tools to force submission. To the government, God has given the sword (Romans 13:4). To the parent, God has given the rod (Proverbs 13:24). To the church is given the keys (Matthew 16:19). But to the husband, God has given no tool to force submission. His position and role do not call for domination but responsibility to love, protect, provide, nourish, and cherish. The model is what Christ does for the church. He does not rule the church with the rod of iron but in love he woos her to follow and submit to his loving leadership.

This is not to excuse hard-hearted and resistant wives. It is to direct those in the first instance of accountability who have the capacity to destroy, ruin, and wreck others through the abuse of their place. It is to address false ideas about what it means to be in authority and be great in God's kingdom.

## **V. Kingdom Greatness Serves**

In contrast to lording it over people, Jesus declares that in the kingdom whoever is great must be your servant and whoever would be first must be your slave.

A. The word for servant is the Greek word from which we get our word deacon. The word speaks of a very low person on the socio-economic scale, one who would be hired to perform common tasks requiring little to no skill. The servant is willing to do what people generally do not want to do. They stoop and humble themselves for things that no one would identify with greatness. But such willingness is what God calls great in the kingdom.

B. The word for slave is DOULOS. It speaks of one who did not even belong to himself. He belonged to his master as his personal property and lived to fulfill the master's wishes. He went only where the master desired and did only what he directed. This term adds color and dynamic to the call to deny yourself and take up your cross. It says that kingdom greatness is willing to go to great lengths of self-sacrifice in order to serve the kingdom.

John MacArthur expresses this position as "willing to serve in the hard place, the uncomfortable place, the lonely place, the demanding place, the place where he is not appreciated and may even be persecuted. Knowing that time is short and eternity long, he is willing to spend and be spent. He is willing to work for excellence without becoming proud, to withstand criticism without becoming bitter, to be misjudged without becoming defensive, and to withstand suffering without succumbing to self-pity."

Serving in this way is not about oneself but others—Christ first and others next. This is the life that is great and first-rate in the sight of God.

## **VI. Kingdom Greatness Is Personified in Jesus**

Jesus is the one who has preeminently demonstrated the portrait of kingdom greatness. No one was ever higher and no one ever bent down lower than him. God does not ask of us what he does not also do in even more amazing fashion. The Son of Man himself, no less than Messiah, no less than God the Son, portrays the humility of submitting to the depths in order to serve and become a slave for the well-being of others.

He came. That is he came to earth from heaven. He left heights of glory. He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself and was conceived and born in the likeness of men. No one could come from any higher.

He came to serve. He came NOT to be served but to serve. Here is the complete opposite to the greatness of the world. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the preeminent One of creation, the one by who all of creation came into existence—even thrones and dominions—he made all things, he holds them all together, and they were made for him (Colossians 1:15-17). And yet when he came into the midst of this creation, he came NOT to be served! This creation owes him its existence. His glory is at stake in it. In stark contrast, he is self-existent. It depends in him. Yet he came not to be served but to serve.

Now when you and I battle with the flesh, we hear the flesh speaking loud and clear. It tells us we should not have to serve others. We should be in a seat of honor. We should be listened to, obeyed, thanked, and recognized. We need to preach back to ourselves that it is so untrue! We are creatures not the creator. We are sinful creatures at that! No, we do not deserve a seat of honor, a place of significance, a reception of respect. Serving is where we belong.

But if there ever was one who did deserve respect, worship, recognition, to BE served, it is Jesus. And yet, that is NOT what he received, and neither is it why he came. He came to serve. And there was NOTHING glamorous about his serving.

He came to give his life a ransom for many. The word ransom speaks of a price paid for a person to be redeemed, the price paid for a slave to be released. In essence the price for human freedom purchases us out of slavery to sin and death. But the price had to be paid to God because what holds us as slaves to sin and death is the debt we owe him for our sin against him. Jesus came to pay that debt. Everything about his coming was in service to those who deserved only his wrath. But he came to serve them. This is Jesus's commentary and explanation of why he was to be delivered over to the Jews and the Gentiles and be condemned to death and be mocked and flogged and crucified. What Jesus was doing on the cross was paying the ransom for those chosen by God and given to him who would believe on him for the freedom he died to purchase.

This is the good news. Perhaps there is one here this morning who knows yourself to be a sinner. And you know yourself to deserve the punishment of God. And you want to be free from what you deserve and be reconciled with God. You can be because Jesus died to serve you. You must repent of your sin and turn to Christ in faith that his ransom payment is enough. You come to him though agreeing to surrender yourself to his lordship, to surrender to become his servant for his glory.

Those of us who already believe, I trust, are visiting afresh the glory of Christ's work for us, his serving us, his becoming a slave for our well-being, and his call for us to follow in his footsteps, not to pay a ransom because we could never do it. But to follow in his footsteps by living to serve not worried about the payoff, just determined to live for the glory of God.

## **Conclusion**

I heard this week of a visitor to a leper colony. The visitor watched intently as a nurse was tenderly caring for the lepers. It was a thankless, repulsive, and humiliating task. The visitor remarked, "I would not do that for a million dollars." Hearing the remark, the nurse turned to the visitor and said, "I wouldn't do it for a million dollars either, but I would do it for Jesus for nothing."

We displease and dishonor God by our prideful resistance to serving. But if you humble yourself before him and serve, he will lift you up. Like Jesus, let us resolve to live not to be served but to serve and glorify God in the serving. That is true greatness.