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A Last is First Test; Matt 20:20-28

GPBC

5.30.21

Introduction – In ch18 the disciples asked Jesus “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” In response to their question Jesus calls a child and sets the child in the middle of the disciples and answers, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The visual illustration was both enlightening and revealing. Greatness in God’s kingdom is not determined by power and might, but rather by humility. God’s kingdom economy is a reversal of the order of the world. You don’t become great in the kingdom of heaven by climbing to the top. Greatness is rather demonstrated by a rare humility that seeks to serve others rather than be served by others. True faith is portrayed in a humble, childlike faith that simply takes God at His Word. Jesus will reiterate this teaching in Matt 23:12 when He says, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

But this is not the only time the disciples hear this kind of teaching from Jesus. The whole point of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard of Matt 20 was to explain what Jesus meant by saying the last will be first in the kingdom. Greatness in the kingdom, first place in the kingdom, comes by way of contentment with God’s gracious sovereignty in our lives. He places us where we need to be. He calls us to His vineyard in His timing. And He bestows abundant grace upon all of His people. Believers are to be like those last workers, content and thankful. That’s how greatness is measured in the kingdom.

Jesus has barely finished all this teaching on greatness being measured by humility and contentment and gratefulness rather than position and power and here come two of His most loved disciples, James and John, asking for exactly that – position and power. Either they just don’t get it or they are quick to forget. And we are just like them aren’t we? That’s why the Bible calls us sheep. It’s difficult not to get wet when you’re swimming in the ocean, and it’s difficult not to adhere to the world’s way of thinking and living when you live in the world. I saw an article just this week that said the reason we need to be in church every week is because we are so forgetful. Just as these disciples needed to be reminded of God’s ways, so do we!

- I. Seeking First Place (vv20-23)
 - a. A couple of things we should note that helps set the context of this conversation.
 - i. First, James and John are not unaware of their mother's request. In fact, they have probably prodded her to make it. We know that all three are in agreement with this request because when Jesus replies, He actually directs His answer to James and John.
 - ii. Second, their mother is likely Salome, who is Mary's sister. From other references in the gospels, she is probably Jesus' aunt and James and John are His cousins. So it could possibly be James and John are applying a little family pressure in this request.
 - b. We could also reason that Salome is a true believer. Jesus has just recently taught in Matt 19:28 that when He returns to sit on His glorious throne, the disciples will also sit on twelve thrones with Him. So she believes this. She believes Jesus is the Messiah. She believes He will one day set up His kingdom in the new world.
 - c. However, here is where sin and pride and selfishness gets mingled with her faith, as is often the case in ours as well. It's not good enough that her sons sit on thrones too, they should sit on the thrones closest to Jesus. In other words, she wants Jesus to promise them the place of prominence among the disciples in the new world. And since Jesus has just taught about His death and resurrection, this new world might come at any day. She needs to get this settled now.
 - i. After all Jesus, we're family. They are your cousins. I'm your loving aunt. These two boys of mine are among the inner circle of the disciples anyway. Surely, they of all the disciples deserve the first seats.
 - d. Jesus responds in two ways. First, He adds to the teaching on greatness. It not only involves humility, but humility in the kingdom often entails great suffering. The path to exaltation in the kingdom is a path of suffering.
 - i. "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Jesus is speaking figuratively here of His coming suffering. Upon which He has just taught in v19. Before Matt 19:28 occurs, Matt 20:19 will occur. 20:19 is the path to 19:28. He will be mocked

and flogged and crucified, then He will sit on His glorious throne! Are you two able to drink that kind of cup if you desire that kind of exaltation.

ii. James and John affirm their willingness to suffer for the sake of the kingdom and Jesus foretells here that they will indeed have a similar cup to drink. Acts 12:2 reports the martyrdom of James by Herod. Rev 1:9 tells of John's banishment to the isle of Patmos. So Jesus' first point of reply is to teach His disciples that following Him means there is a cross before there is a crown.

e. The second point of reply is to remind them of the lessons of the parable of the workers. God is sovereign. He determines our station in this life and the life to come. And He's gracious. Is it not enough that you have already been told you will sit upon a throne? Shouldn't your response be gratitude for grace rather than seeking more.

f. You see when Jesus teaches a lesson like the last will be first, He's not just making up a nice feeling spiritual lesson – He's teaching the reality of the kingdom.

II. The Way of the World and the Way of Believers (vv24-27)

a. The way of the world is to climb to the top by whatever means, neglecting and abusing and mistreating others to get what you want or think you deserve. Worldly rulers exercise their power to dominate and oppress and use others to their own selfish advantage.

b. The way of the world always results in jealousy and envy and strife. Even here the other ten disciples become indignant with James and John. How dare they think they deserve more than we? They are angry with the insolence of James and John and probably a little miffed at themselves for not thinking to ask.

c. But Jesus says the way of believers is not the way of the world – It shall not be so among you. The kingdom way is an upside down pyramid. Greatness is not at the top; it's at the bottom. It's not about position and power; it's about service and love.

d. It's not about what others can provide and do for you; it's about what you can provide and do for others. The way of believers is the opposite of the world. True faith is radically counter-culture. It looks

totally different. It treats others totally different. It's not about what you can get but rather what you can give.

- e. Serve others to the degree that you begin to look more like their slave than their peer. If you radically love people like that – that's kingdom greatness. That's kingdom greatness because that's exactly how the kingdom's king loves you!

III. The Way of Believers is the Way of the Savior (v28)

- a. "even as" – this is My path. I'm calling you to follow Me. And I came not to be served, but to serve.
- b. And to serve in the greatest way possible – to give My life as a ransom for many. That's the kind of radical servant love Jesus lived and calls upon us to live as His people.
- c. He gives His life – He voluntarily lays down His life for the benefit and blessing of undeserving people – you and me!
- d. As a ransom – a ransom is a payment made in order to secure the freedom of a slave. That's how Jesus describes His own death. In other words, He gives His life as a payment for sin so that I might be freed from the guilt and punishment of my own rebellion against God.
- e. Jesus is not only our Savior; He's our chief example. He says, "You want to be great in the kingdom? Live like that. Serve like that. Give your life for others like that. Love like that."
- f. Our live of sacrificial service isn't the same as Jesus'. We don't save people by being their servant, but we do point them to the Savior by living with this kind of radical, self-denying, sacrificial, servant love.
- g. And what could be greater as citizens of the kingdom than bringing others into it?

Conclusion – Philippians 2:5-11. You see greatness in the kingdom comes through humble, servant, sacrifice. That was the way of the Savior, and that's the way of the saved – Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus.