

Matthew 20:17-28 ¹⁷ *Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them,* ¹⁸ *“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 ¹⁹ 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!”* ²⁰ *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.”* ²² *“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.* 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.”* ²⁴ *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.”*

There is greatness in service.

Christ has called his disciples to be servants

Christ gave himself in service to us

You are called to be a servant. Your Lord and Savior has called you to serve others. He has called you to serve in the roles that God has placed you in, in your life. He has called you to be a faithful son, a devoted husband, a caring father. He has called you to be a good daughter, a faithful wife, a loving mother. He has called you to be a good friend, a good neighbor, a good co-worker, employer, employee, or retiree. God has called you to live in unity and peace with your fellow believer. You are called to be a child of God who serves the LORD and your fellow man and thus demonstrates the love of Christ in your life. You are called to be a servant, to serve others knowing that Christ came to serve you.

You are called to be a servant. Is there any part of you that resists that notion? Is there any part of you that assumes others should serve my needs? Is there a part of you that is kind of sick of serving, is tired of caring for others and kind of wishes that others would take care of you more? If I haven’t struck a nerve yet, how about when Jesus says this: ***Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.*** If there wasn’t a notion of resistance before, there is very likely some resistance now; a slave! Really Jesus, a slave! But that’s kind of the point. Jesus knows that deep down each one of us has an issue with pride, and he challenges how we view service and how we view greatness.

We may not be outright glory hogs, we might not tout ourselves to be the greatest thing as sliced bread or be so bold to ask for a place of honor at Jesus right or left side, but we all have

our moments. As we interact with others, in our work, in our homes, even in our congregations, there will always be an urge, an inherent desire to be served instead of wanting to serve others. And perhaps that's because we are quick to associate being served with greatness and we struggle to see how serving others could be great or even good.

And so, this morning what looks like a strange request that might be easily dismissed as something that we might never do, is in fact, an opportunity for a much-needed reminder. We routinely need the reminder to serve others to keep us from being prideful. We also need this encouragement to serve to keep us from being discouraged in our service. And so, Jesus shows us there is greatness in service. As disciples of Jesus we are called to be servants. As disciples of Jesus we know the greatness of his service.

It seems that here in Matthew chapter 20, the disciples' idea of greatness very much had to do with the common notions of recognition and authority, praise, status, and importance. As they head up to the holy and important city of Jerusalem, Jesus pulls his disciples aside and shows them the greatness of God's saving plan. However, the disciples don't seem to pay much attention. Instead at the very next moment that they have opportunity, James and John lead their mother toward Jesus, so that she can make her request. And this is what she asks for, ***"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."***

It certainly seems that the disciples had not yet grasped the greatness of Jesus role as Savior, instead it appears that they were still holding on to some notion that Jesus was some sort of earthly Messiah. And because Jesus was this great Messiah they would soon be rewarded somehow, in some tangible and measurable way. The disciples have this image of greatness stuck in their heads. They had thoughts of earthly glory running through their heads because they were followers of this great man. They had seen the things that Jesus could do and how the crowds came and followed him. They could easily imagine how Jesus could turn such popularity into some earthly honor and power, and it appears they even begin to day dream about sitting in places of authority. Perhaps they even pictured a real-life palace complete with thrones and seats of power. And with this image fixed in their minds, James and John, wanted to lock down their share, their particular slice of the glory and the power that was bound to be coming their way. And the other ten disciples became angry, indignant because they too longed for such privileges of greatness.

Perhaps that is only natural for us to fall into similar thinking, for greatness is still very much indentified in such overt and obvious ways throughout our human experience. Greatness in our world is often paired with those who are honored, praised, and lifted up. According to our human way of seeing things, greatness, just has to include being served and waited on and enjoying easiness of life because that is what we see in the world around us. That is the kind of privilege that often comes with earthly honor. And so, it is not that surprising that we too have moments where we long to have our relationship with Christ turn some sort of earthly profit, win for us some tangible advantage. In our pride, in our selfishness, we want privilege and honor and ease. In our selfishness, we might even attempt to turn our life of faith into some sort of pay for play arrangement with God. If I play according to his rules, if I play my cards right, or ask the right questions, or say the right prayers, or do the right things than I can figure out a way to make my faith work out better for me. If I play my cards right I could work my way up the ranks and be living the high life. But, these are presuppositions of the flesh that are never

supported by Christ. Instead Jesus speaks of serving others. He calls us to submit to each other out of reverence to Christ. He calls us to serve our God and serve our neighbor.

If we would pay any attention Jesus clearly communicates time and again our life in his kingdom will certainly include blessings, but it will also include sacrifice and service. And so, it should not surprise us at all when Jesus describes the difference between greatness as defined by this world and what greatness among his disciples looks like. ***“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—***

The last few weeks we have been reminded what our Savior has set us free from: sin, and death, hell, and temptation. This is what Christ has set us free from, but this morning let us consider what has Christ set us free for? He has not only set us free for heaven, but he has set us free for a life of service. We are called to serve God and to serve each other. We have been set free to live in the Spirit and to follow the will of God; and God’s will for us is that we serve God and neighbor.

Being a servant, however, can be difficult, to help and serve, to responsibly fill the roles that God has given each one of us can be challenging, it can be exhausting. Pride and jealousy, misplaced focus and an unhealthy desire for excessive recognition or privilege can ruin our service to God and to each other. We might become resentful of the roles that we are placed in and our relationships are strained because of such expectations.

Our Savior addresses our misplaced notions and encourages us to selflessly serve each other. While some might see our service as lowly or ordinary *He* calls our humble service great. Our God is pleased when we as husbands, and wives, sons and daughters, neighbors, friends, teachers, and the like carry out the daily tasks of caring for each other. When Christian parents humbly serve their children, it is a great and wonderful thing. When a Christian husband serves and cares for his wife, when a Christian wife serves and supports her husband it is a great and blessed thing. When a believing man or woman selflessly helps and serves his neighbor, church or community, our God is pleased. It is a great and wonderful thing when we selflessly serve each other, when we help and care for each other. Our God is pleased when our desire is to help and care for those around us, no matter how ordinary or thankless the job. He calls such humble service great.

When in our pride, we insist on getting our way and being served the Lord calls us to repentance. And when we give ourselves to service Jesus calls you great. This is a welcome encouragement especially when we are weary or discouraged in our service. Our Lord Jesus goes as far as giving his servants the great and wonderful honor in that he associates our service to his. He tells his disciples, ***whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—*** and then in the very next breath he says, ***just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.*** He associates his wonderful sacrifice to our humble service that is done in faith.

Jesus calls such lives of Christian service great because it reflects the love that he came to show to us. In his great love for us he became a servant. Each day, each moment of his life, was

an exercise in loving service. He obeyed the Father's will for us. He achieved perfection so that we might be given his righteousness. And then the time would come when he would pay the ultimate price. He served our needs as he gave himself to be our all atoning sacrifice for all our sins.

As he made that final journey up to Jerusalem with his disciples this was his goal. He knew the suffering that was waiting for him in Jerusalem. He had explained it and laid it out before the disciples. He would be betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and the teacher of the law. He would be turned over to the Romans who would mock and beat and crucify him. This was the cup of suffering that he would willingly drink out of love for us. He was our suffering servant and he embraced that role knowing that the Father would be pleased with his sacrifice and would reward his faithful service by raising him up in glory. ¹⁸ ***"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 ¹⁹ 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!"*** Praise be to Christ, for his selfless service, for his all atoning and perfect sacrifice.

We cannot come close to perfection in our service to God and to each other. Daily we meet and surpass our tipping point. We become frustrated or tired with selfless service, and instead we slip in thinking and acting selfishly. We hide from our responsibilities. We easily become frustrated with those whom we feel don't show us the respect that we think we deserve. When life is not as easy or honored as we think we deserve so quickly, so frequently we reach our tipping points and we lash out in frustration or we indulge in selfishness.

In repentance, we turn to Jesus as we give our unending thanks to God. For with Jesus there was no tipping point but rather he continually served us and perfectly gave himself for our needs. He served and he served and he served. Even when his students failed to listen, when they started arguing among themselves, when some of them sent their mother in to take up his time with a silly question, he didn't snap, he didn't lose it. He didn't give himself over to selfishness, but he kept on serving. He patiently taught, instructed, rebuked, guided, loved all of his disciples, and he even faithfully endured the awful way of the cross that was set before him. He did it all for them, he did it all for us! Such was his greatness hidden in humble service!

As we come before him in worship we stand in awe of his selfless love, but then motivated by his perfect service to us we are refreshed and renewed to go out and serve and love each other. As we hear our Savior's words of rebuke we repent of our pride. As we hear and we recall his selfless love we are encouraged in our service to others knowing how Christ Jesus came to serve us. ***The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.***

He became a servant to save us. We gladly serve God and each other out of thanks to Jesus Christ. Christ Jesus gave himself in service to us. And now Christ calls his disciples to be servants who reflect the greatness of his love and care. Yes, fellow disciples in Christ, there is greatness in service to Christ. There is greatness when disciples of Jesus serve others. Amen.