

## “SERVANTHOOD”

*descending into greatness...*

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**Matthew 20:17-28** *Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, 18 "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes;*

*and they will condemn Him to death, 19 "and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again." 20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." 23 So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 "And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—28 "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

The passage before us advances further the principle of the often *bizarro* “upside down” world that embodies the kingdom realm of God. That special present rule and experience which exists here and now and which will be fully manifested in the age to come. Jesus wrapped up the last section of scripture saying *"So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."* And He goes on to end this one with a similar precept saying *"...whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant...whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave."*

Pressed almost inconspicuously between these two heavy principles, Jesus reminds the apostles of the true and practical cost of such a faith...of living in that “upside down world.” He again puts words to His passion and a text to His mission. Jesus reminds the apostles where His journey was going to take Him. Yet it seemed that each time Jesus brought this issue up to these guys, they suddenly become deaf. They just didn’t get it. Or perhaps they were like us so often and didn’t *want* to get it. They were so focused upon Jesus setting up his earthly kingdom and fixated on what *they* wanted Christ to be, that they turned a deaf ear to everything else. It just didn’t fit with their idea of how things ought to be.

They were but mere men. Flawed, and still fighting the flesh! They wanted to force this new reality into the mold that they had created for such a task, *even when Jesus clearly taught something different.* Again, so much of the greater church today continues to do the same. And yet in 2000 years, Jesus has yet to acquiesce. No, the king is still on the throne and there will be no “tweaking” of the knobs by man, no matter how much we insist upon trying.

It wasn't until *after* it had all taken place that they started to wake up to what He had said. But even then it was all so crazy incredible that they couldn't wrap their heads around the things they were seeing...the things they were experiencing. Jesus was marching towards the cross, with eyes wide open, and while doing so He was at the same time trying to get His boys to open up *their* eyes and figure out where *they* really were going.

From all we know about James and John, it is hard to imagine that this event went down in any other way other than the two of them putting their mother up to this. It's *possible* that mom was operating solo out there, but culturally we would be hard pressed to accept that version of these events. More likely this all transpired out of the pure unadulterated ego and self-promotion of these two disciples. One can't help but wonder where those "sons of thunder" were *that* day! Because now they looked like just a couple of momma's boys. But to her credit, she at least knew who was running the show and who she had to talk to make things happen!

We must be careful not to think of James and John as some terrible guys in this matter. For sure, these men took Jesus seriously and believed He indeed had the power to grant such a request. So I would give them credit for that at least. But they were like so many men (and women!) who sit in church each week. Sadly our knowledge of the Word of God often fails to humble us at it should, but instead merely "puffs us up" in our possession of it. (1 Corinthians 8:1) We are apt to think ourselves as *more* because of our religious interaction, rather than being humbled by what should be our knowledge in such of our inadequacy and dependency.

James and John sought not for a chance to *serve*, but for the chance to receive some personal glory that comes via position; *honor of recognition*. Ironically, we forget that our Lord knows the heart and motives of each of us. Isaiah 14:13-14 tells us of that same track being followed by Satan himself: '*I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.*'

The "inner circle" of the apostles, James, John and Peter, had seen and experienced things that the others had not. The temptation to get caught up with ourselves as we are given greater position is very strong. Instead of grasping that as mere fishermen and cultural nobodies they had been given the opportunity to play in the major leagues, they were seeking to be anointed MVP.

"*you do not know what you ask...*" Well, that's for sure! Many of us attempt to enter into the realm of discipleship with all of its blessings without grasping the extent of the cost of the warfare that goes along with it. While Jesus indeed promised that "*everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life,*" Mark reminds us that such is also "*with persecutions.*" Certainly in this case, the sons of thunder had a reach which exceeded their grasp. For they, like so many of us, were quick to answer "*oh, yes Lord! We're able to take it on!*"

One has to admire their passion and tenacity, if not their blind foolishness. We repeat this scenario over and over even today. Notice the careful use of the term "baptism" by Christ. For such brings in the picture of an all-encompassing commitment and experience. A "full dunk" into whatever one is facing! For Jesus it was the cross and more; it was a complete life *and death* experience, as it must for us also today as His followers. We are called to follow in His footsteps...to die to oneself and one's own earthly plans in exchange for the greater plan God has in mind for us...chosen before the foundations of the earth were laid!

Whether they really understood it or not, these boys were indeed in for it. As we read on through the gospels and the book of Acts, we see it up close and personal. They would indeed "*drink of His cup.*" It has been said that "*James died a martyr's death; John lived a martyr's life.*" Either way, it was a baptized cost. It cost them *everything*. And it appears they did so with no regret. No one backed down, (accept for Judas), no one flinched, no one recanted. They all leaned into the wind and met their destiny head on.

But the honored position that they sought did not *and yet does not* necessarily come with the territory. No such promises are given in Scripture, nor in Spirit. Our position is to *serve*, and thus the only title we're assured of is *servant*.

Not to be outdone, along comes the other ten to manifest that they too, are men in the flesh. One need not guess what motivated this displeasure in them. Its funny how we get all indignant concerning selfishness or sin in others, when the truth is that most of the time they only beat us to the punch.

Jesus takes this great opportunity to capitalize on a "teaching moment." He first "*calls them to Himself...*" This is where we must start...this is where all the answers to life are. Jesus understood clearly the dynamic of the kingdom and how it ran the opposite of this world. He reminds them that it is those of this world who seek position as a door to *power*. Power to rule over others, power to lift ourselves up over others. But Paul reminds us in Ephesians 5 that when it comes to such covetousness... "*let it not even be once named among you.*"

Jesus teaches us that the way of the Kingdom lies in the constant seeking to be a servant. In the eyes of Christ, the way to be great, the *way to be first*, is to be the servant, ***the slave***. The word "slave" here is *bond-slave*, meaning a *slave by choice*. Such a person is in fact *less* than a servant! For a servant may very well be a paid employee. They may be *servicing* but they may very well be benefiting personally from the work. Are you?

The world wants to *rule*, the Kingdom wants to *serve*. Not only is this an important attribute to position in this borderless kingdom, but it seems to be virtually the *only* one needed! The way *up* is to work our way *down*. To "descend to greatness..."

What does it mean to be great? No doubt we are apt to avoid such a discussion in the company of others, at least as far as it pertains to ourselves. We may talk about who was the greatest basketball player of all times, or speak of famous world leaders and politicians, or even successful business men and women and champions of the stock market. But I wonder what we would find if we asked not *who* is great but rather the dynamics of the position itself: as in, *what does it mean to be successful? What does it mean to be significant? What does it mean to be respected or influential?* Maybe that's how we should put the question of greatness. Ultimately, one must set a bar somewhere...a "standard" by which to measure the rest which would follow. Generally, we tend compare ourselves with others to see how we're doing. But who is the model? Who is the chief in our minds?

The key to greatness in the kingdom of God is firstly grasping just who the king is: *where the power lay*. And then we must understand that to actually hear those words "well done thy good and faithful servant" one must actually have *served*. Such can only come *after* one actually serves. After the sacrifice is made, and having at least a handle on the reality of that sacrifice.

Imagine if a young private approached the general on the morning of June 6, 1944, just as the 160,000 Allied troops landed along the 50-mile stretch of heavily-fortified French coastline, to fight Nazi Germany on the beaches of Normandy, France. Imagine that young private standing oblivious of the more than 5,000 ships and 13,000 aircraft behind him moving forward to support the D-Day invasion, and the more than 9,000 Allied soldiers who would die or be wounded in the immediate days that would follow, and yet he still asks the general if he might receive the medal of valor for his participation.

I have stood alongside young men and women in far flung mission fields as well as numerous bible studies and leadership roles, only to later watch them crumble under the weight of the battle as well as the weight of their own egos. Many that today either cling white knuckled to the last shreds of their faith or have abandoned the fight all together because they failed to be recognized or were denied the badge or the door plaque with their name on it. When the shooting started and the pressure and discomfort began, they folded or melted into a puddle. Off they went to seek greener pastures and an easier more prestigious position. One with self glory and recognition.

I can tell you that in all my years of ministry I have never yet seen a one of them find it. Because they failed to understand that they never had a real reason to be on the field of play to begin with. It was all an undeserved privilege and honor to even be able to be a part of the team: *this team*. It certainly is for me.

The boys had barely entered into the contest and they are already talking about what position they'd have in the victory celebration. So Jesus is saying, "You don't understand my kingdom, because the kingdom I am going to bring in at first, is going to be a kingdom of humiliation. It's going to be a kingdom of suffering. It's going to be a kingdom that is going to require you to sacrifice everything for me and *then* will come the triumph and the glory and the joy."

We also are so often blinded to the nature of kingdom greatness. What it means to serve the king. What we are being asked to *do* and to *be*, is no less than that which Jesus *did* and *was* upon this earth. He could have ruled with all of the power and force of the deity that He was. He could have been an *earthly* king and ruled with an iron fist. Instead he lived and died as a *servant* of both mankind and His heavenly Father. He *gave His life as a ransom...a payment...for many...for all of sinful mankind*. He died that we might live. He served that we might serve. We all grasp the fact we have been saved because we are lost...we have been saved for eternal life and for abundant living. But the reality is also that we've been saved to serve. You and I have been mobilized for ministry, and no credit or position is ever promised.

It seems that through the years of battle that would follow the resurrection of Christ, the apostles would indeed come to understand the blessings and the cost of being servants of Christ. They would witness the birth of the church in Acts and oversee the wonder of its initial spread throughout the world. But they would also come to understand the cost! James' zeal for Jesus resulted in his being the first of the 12 apostles to be martyred. He was killed with the sword on order of King Herod Agrippa I of Judea, about 44 A.D., in a general persecution of the early church. Historical record says that Peter, as he approached the place of his own execution, gave a speech to the people where he concluded by saying, "*But it is time for you, Peter, to surrender your body to those who are taking it. Take it, then, you whose duty it is. I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards in this way and no other.*" Peter, not daring to be compared to the glory and sacrifice that was the cross of Christ, was then crucified upside down on his cross and entered into the arms of Christ once again.

John would be tortured by being boiled in oil...and yet he did not die, and was then banished to the island of Patmos. Even that did not deter or apparently faze him, for this servant there penned the Book of Revelation. There is a church tradition, which says, that when John was an old man in Ephesus, he had to be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples. At these meetings, he was accustomed to say no more than, "Little children, love one another!" After a time, the disciples wearied at always hearing the same words, asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" "It is the Lord's command," was his reply. "And if this alone be done, it is enough!"

***Ahhh, a servant to the end!***