

## Matthew 20:20-28—Greatness, Power, and the Kingdom of God

### 1. Introduction

- a. *Father, grant us today the grace to clearly see the beauty of Christ in the gospel and to delight in the ways that Jesus changes every dimension of our existence. Amen.*
- b. If we are honest with ourselves, each of us longs for greatness; each of us longs for power
  - i. Friedrich Nietzsche went so far as to state that “the world is will to power—and nothing besides,” that the quest for power is the driving force in all of human history
- c. This desire is as old as Eden, when Adam and Eve grew tired of submission and obedience under the reign of God and elected to establish their own authority that they might “become like God” (cf. Gen 3:5)
- d. **FCF:** As sinful and broken people, we too reject the glory and greatness of God and seek to promote our own status, often by neglecting, trampling, and using others for our own benefit
  - i. Even for Christians, we find it very easy to deceive ourselves into believing that we seek prestige so that we can use it for Jesus...but this is often simply an excuse to justify our thirst for personal glory
  - ii. We seek greatness in possessions (whether it’s having the most money or the most crayons) because the person with the most holds control over others
  - iii. We seek greatness in popularity because the one at the top can manipulate the masses
  - iv. We seek greatness in academic success because that’s our ticket to the prestigious school and the influential career
  - v. Though these are often the kinds of goals we celebrate, at the heart of each of these is a rebellious desire to make much of ourselves that has overthrown any desire to delight in God and love others
  - vi. We need the grace of God to save us from ourselves
- e. **Organization:** We are going to explore Matthew 20:20-28 to see what kind of power Jesus brings and how the gospel of Christ revolutionizes our understanding of greatness
- f. **Proposition:** Because Jesus is the suffering Servant who lays aside power to give his life for his people, we must rest in his glory and seek a greatness that is characterized *not* by pride, domination, and strength, *but* by humility, service, and weakness

### 2. Text: Matthew 20:20-28

- a. *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.”*

### 3. Exploring the Text

- a. Context: Jesus has already taught that the kingdom belongs to those who humble themselves like children; he has predicted his suffering and death as Messiah; and he is now on his way to Jerusalem where he will crucified as “King of the Jews”
  - i. But James and John are focused solely on their position and power in Jesus’ kingdom
- b. Through their mother, the two brothers request that Jesus would give them seats on his right and on his left
  - i. These are places of honor—they desire to share in Jesus’ authority
- c. Jesus responds that the brothers do not really understand what they are asking
  - i. When Jesus asks if they can drink from the cup that he is going to drink, he uses a rich Old Testament image that here represents suffering
  - ii. Jesus’ question reveals that the brothers’ expectations are not quite right; greatness in the kingdom comes not by positions of power, but by suffering with and for Christ
- d. “We are able” is their reply, and their overconfidence is obvious
  - i. Remember, in the moment of greatest suffering, when Jesus was being led to the cross, the disciples (including James and John) deserted him
- e. Ironically, Jesus says they *will indeed* share in his suffering, but their request is completely out of line with the nature of Christ’s kingdom
  - i. Authority isn’t given in response to selfish requests; Jesus reminds them that such an honor is graciously granted according to the good pleasure of God the Father
- f. When the other disciples hear about what James and John have asked, they are frustrated—most likely because they are afraid the two brothers have gotten to Jesus first
  - i. And in the midst of this conflict, Jesus teaches
- g. He points to the way power is exercised among the Gentiles: rulers lorded their authority over the people
  - i. We see this same dynamic at work in our own society—in politics, sports, popular media, and our own circle of friends, power is often a tool for manipulation and self-exaltation
  - ii. This is the greatness of the world

- h. Jesus contrasts the world and his kingdom when he tells his disciples, *“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.”*
    - i. With one statement, Jesus turns the priorities and patterns of a broken world upside-down
    - ii. Power in the kingdom of God isn’t domination of those underneath us; greatness isn’t dictated by prominence
    - iii. Jesus says that true power and greatness are marked by giving up all hope of making a name for ourselves and humbling ourselves to the point that we are like slaves in our desire to love and serve others
  - i. And the reason that the kingdom operates this way is that Jesus operates this way; the Son of God—the Great King himself—came not to live at the expense of others, but to die for the broken, the needy, and the weak so that he might restore us back to God
4. **Application: How does the gospel reshape our understanding of greatness?**
- a. *When we see the splendor of Jesus in the way that he has served undeserving sinners like us, we will gladly rest in his glory and stop striving for our own*
    - i. The only way that any of us is going to give up our quest for the kind of greatness the world recognizes is when we are captivated by the greatness of someone else
    - ii. At no other point in all of history are the beauty and goodness and glory of God more clearly visible than in the cross of Christ when perfect justice and perfect mercy and perfect power and perfect weakness collide so that sinners like us might be welcomed into the family of God
    - iii. Jesus has done it, from beginning to end; we have no claim to the glory that rightfully belongs to Jesus
    - iv. I am no longer a slave to that unquenchable thirst for personal prestige when I am lost in delight in Jesus
  - b. *When we see the beauty of Jesus in the way that he has served undeserving sinners like us, we will rejoice that true greatness is not influence and power, but humility, service, and weakness*
    - i. Jesus is both the model and the motivation for our loving sacrifice for others
      - 1. Jesus is the model because in the gospel, he perfectly shows us what it means to give up acclaim for the sake of another
        - a. Phil 2:5-8—*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, 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.*
        - b. And so we are called to walk in the humility of our king
      - 2. But Jesus is the motivation because in the gospel, he lays down his power *for us*, and when you have tasted grace like that, it is a joy to lay down your power for others and for the glory of Christ

- a. As we behold the glory of the Lord and all of the ways that he has poured himself out for our good, the passions of our hearts will literally shift so that we enjoy showing grace in weakness to the lowly, neglected, and outcast
- c. **Elementary School:** It is easy to seek greatness by having the most and refusing to share
  - i. But we must look to Jesus and see the way he gave up possessions and comforts at the cross to give us all sorts of gifts that we don't deserve; then we can delight in sharing
- d. **Middle School:** It is easy to seek greatness by using other people and working our way to the top of the social ladder
  - i. But we must look to Jesus and see the way he embraced humiliation at the cross to give us a new status before God; then we can take joy in humbling ourselves before others rather than always seeking popularity
- e. **High School:** It is easy to seek greatness by striving to make it to a prestigious school so that we can one day find a career that will give us all the comfort and money and influence that we could ever want
  - i. But we must look to Jesus and see the way he used all the resources at his disposal not for personal gain, but for sinners like us; then we can gratefully anticipate a future shaped by sacrificial love
- f. **Teachers:** It is very easy to reinforce worldly standards of greatness in our classrooms when we emphasize personal ambition as a virtue and pay special attention to the academic and social elites
  - i. But we must look to Jesus and see the way he demonstrated his glory by serving a broken world so that the gospel transforms our definition of success and creates in us a desire to faithfully walk alongside students who are largely overlooked
- g. May God make us a people and a school where Jesus is treasured and where love, humility, and grace are embraced because the gospel is taking root in our hearts