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August 1st, 2021

**Matthew 20:17-34**

**Upside Down Values: The Greatness of Serving**

If you walk into a pre-school, kindergarten, or elementary school classroom, you're likely to find a banner that says something like, "Shoot for the stars," or its equivalent. Parents and school teachers frequently tell kids, "Aim for greatness; you can be whatever you want to be!" And so little kids grow up doing just that: dreaming of greatness! When I was young, I wanted to be an astronaut - I wanted to, quite literally, shoot for the stars! My Chinese students - whom I teach English to during the week - are no different: many of them have very ambitious goals and dreams as well. Just this week, as I was teaching a unit on jobs and the workplace, I asked a student, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and he replied, "A professional basketball player." I've actually lost count how many students have given that answer! Many kids grow up wanting to be someone important and valuable, like a police officer, firefighter or soldier; many kids today grow up wanting to be a famous movie or TV star (or I guess, now, a famous YouTube or TikTok star); many want to be famous artists, rock stars, book writers, or maybe even president.

But how many kids, if you were to ask them what they want to be when they grow up, would answer: "I want to be a janitor; I want to be a servant"? How many would say, "I want to live my life serving others, even if it's in the most boring, meaningful, thankless position imaginable"? My guess is, very few kids, if any, are saying that, and very few parents are encouraging anything like it. We hunger for greatness and significance. And being the lowliest of servants just doesn't seem very important, great, or significant to us, does it?

Last week, I opened the sermon by talking about how Jesus's Kingdom functions on the counter-intuitive principles of grace, which is *upside-down* from the way our world functions on the principles of *merit*, earning your keep by your own works and getting what you *deserve*, getting what's *fair*. This week, we see another way that the Kingdom of God seems *upside-down* from our worldly perspective. From a worldly perspective, we value pride, ambition, fame, power, prestige, and glory; the world does not value humility, meekness, contentment with where you are and what you have, or quietly following others. We put being the leader on the top, and

humbly serving on the bottom; but the Kingdom of God flips that paradigm completely upside-down. That's what we see in our passage this morning, from Matt. 20:17-34. Jesus very plainly spells out the main thrust of this passage in verse 26: "It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant." And the rest of the passage also very clearly reminds us *why* this is the case: because *Jesus himself* sets the standard of servant leadership. Why are the values of the Kingdom up-side down from the way the world values leadership, power, and status? *Because the King of the Kingdom of Heaven - the eternal King Jesus Himself - came not to be served, but to serve, even by laying down His life in death to save us from our sin and the death we deserve.*

That's the main point of this passage. So let's break that main idea down, point by point. So point number one of the main idea of this passage is:

### **I. We Must Not Pridefully Pursue Power, Prestige, and Position (vv.20-28)**

The passage begins, in verses 17-19, with Jesus giving the third explicit prophecy of his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection to take place in Jerusalem, where they are headed. We'll come back to these verses in our final point. But for now, let's simply note that the disciples, once again, seem to miss the point, not truly grasping what Jesus is saying about his mission, his kingdom, or his cross.

The fact that they miss it, I think, is underlined by what immediately follows. In verse 20, we read, "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something." In other words, James and John, two of the Twelve disciples, come up to him with their mother. IN Mark and Luke, we're told that James and John themselves make the request; but here, we see that it's the mom asking. I think this is very easy to reconcile: James and John are definitely making this request, complicit in what the mom is asking, but she is asking on their behalf (possibly because she is related to Jesus). She essentially comes up and respectfully asks if he will do something for her. So, instead of saying, "Sure, anything you want," he instead very wisely replies, "What do you want?"

In verse 21, she says, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." All throughout the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has proclaimed his coming Kingdom. We have seen over and over again that Jesus is the promised Messiah, God's promised savior and Davidic King. Jesus came to usher in His kingdom. And we

just last week, in chapter 19, verse 28, that Jesus promised to his disciples, who believed in Him as the Messiah King so much that they abandoned everything to follow him, that they would one day sit on “twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” when he came into His kingdom. And apparently, when the disciples heard this, being given such a high place of honor didn’t satisfy them - they wanted more; they wanted to be given *the highest* seats of honor, next to Christ at least: they wanted to sit on his “left” and “right.” To sit on the “right hand” and “left hand” of a prominent person, ruler, or king, would mean to be given very prominent positions of status, prestige, and power, to be “second” and “third,” so to speak. So in other words, the mother of James and John is asking for her sons to be given places of high honor in his kingdom, to share in his glory. And again, we know, both from the context here and the parallel passages of Mark and Luke, that James and John are by no means innocent parties here, somehow caught off-guard by their well-intentioned but misguided mother; no, they are complicit in this, ambitiously aspiring to as much glory and honor as they can muster.

When the other ten disciples heard about this, in verse 24, “they were indignant” at James and John. Now, this is not because they, being so humble, were absolutely appalled at the rank pride and greedy ambition on display; no, instead, they are merely upset that James and John thought of asking for this first! They all want to be “first” among each other; they all want to achieve as much honor, prestige, power, and glory as they can.

Now, it would be easy to rag on the disciples here; it would be easy for us to point the finger, scoff, and mockingly say, “Good grief! Look at those foolish disciples! They just can’t seem to get it, can they? How could they possibly follow Jesus so long and still act so pridefully and sinfully? How could they possibly display just sinful ambition and greed, living for their own personal gain and glory, without even a shred of shame, not even trying to hide it?” We could rightly say that of them; but only if we then turn the finger to *ourselves*, and see the exact same tendencies of arrogant pride, greedy ambition, and lust for personal power, prestige, and prominence in our own hearts. After all, this is the way the world works, isn’t it? Our sinful hearts are set to the default mode of constantly scrambling for more and more power over others. Our sinful hearts are tuned to the notes of greed and jealousy, constantly coveting what others have - constantly looking to those who have higher authority than we do, wanting to be in their place; looking to the guy down the street who gets all the acclaim while our hard work and brilliance goes unnoticed; silently burning with bitterness and jealousy towards the other person

in the office who got the promotion (even though everyone knows, after all, that I really deserved it!), or towards the other guy who always seems to get an easy break, who never seems to work as hard, or as long, or as well as you do, but seems to get all the credit and success anyways. For you kids and teenagers here, maybe it means wanting more than anything to be part of the popular crowd at school, or to get as many likes as possible on social media. Whoever you are, search your heart this morning: in what ways do you crave power, authority, and influence over others? In what ways do you crave attention, fame, popularity, social status, and prestige? In what ways do you pridefully seek your own honor and glory? I have to ask myself those exact same questions, and I *cringe* at the ugly pride and bitter jealousy I find inside my own heart at times. My guess is, you will, too, because this is a common struggle and temptation for all of us. After all, this is the way the world works!

Jesus acknowledges this in verse 25. He called all twelve disciples together - including James and John, and the indignant ten - and gives them a rebuke: “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.*” The pagan Romans despised humility as weakness and blatantly coveted power; when they had power, they flaunted their authority and strength over others. Politicians today do not run their campaigns on humility and meekness; they flaunt their greatness and lord their pride over others. The business world doesn’t run on putting others first; it prizes prideful ambition and a greed for power and prestige.

But Jesus’s rebuke and command to us Christians, as his followers, is painfully clear here: “It shall not be so among you” (v.26). There is no place for such pride in our hearts; there is no place for seeking our own honor and glory - we must seek the honor and glory of God alone. Christ flips the values of the world on their head, once again, and tells us that if we will follow him to eternal life and be apart of his kingdom, then we must do the same. We *cannot* be a people who are consumed by pride and ambition. We cannot make it our goal in life to prop ourselves up, to always climb higher and higher up the ladder in the eyes of the world, to achieve as much power, prestige, fame, and glory as we can. We cannot be driven by our own reputation or what people think of us. That is the way of the world. That is the way of sin. It is *not* the way of Christ.

So what, then, should we be driven by? What should characterize us as Christ’s people? What should we pursue instead?

## II. We Must Pursue Serving Others, Even When it Involves Suffering for Christ (vv.20-28)

Jesus's full rebuke and admonition to the disciples is in verses 26-28: "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."

If we're not supposed to be marked by pride, serving ourselves and pursuing our own power, prestige, and glory, then what *are* we supposed to pursue? We are called to obey Christ by *humbly serving each other*. We're called to pursue servant-hearts; we're called to pursue *raising each other up*, not lifting up ourselves. Each and every one of us, as Christians, is called to be described as *humble and servant-hearted*. We are called to ask ourselves, "How can I best be of service to the Lord and seek His glory? How can I best serve his church - with my time, money, resources, words, and gifts? How can I serve the lost? How can I serve others in my words - speaking in such a way that builds up and encourages, instead of tearing down? How can I better rejoice and delight in the building up of my brothers and sisters and their success? How has the Lord uniquely gifted me to meet the needs of my church family - what are ways I can serve?"

My prayer for us, as Bread of Life Baptist Church, is that we would be known as a *servant-hearted community*; a community of believers that constantly puts others first, constantly seeking ways to serve one another, even when it is inconvenient or goes without receiving any thanks or acknowledgment. And I praise the Lord for the many servant-hearted examples that I have seen from many of you over this past year!

We're all called to die to our pride and glory, and pursue serving one another instead. But this should *especially* be true of church leadership, which I think is a clear application of the context of this passage. The Bible gives us two church offices - elders (or what we normally call pastors) and deacons. And both groups of people in our church should be those who everyone regards as *humble, servant-hearted leaders; those who do not lead for their own personal gain, but instead lead in order to serve and benefit others - namely, those who serve the church and the lost unto the glory of God above all*. I regularly pray that the Lord would raise up other qualified and gifted men as deacons and pastors in our church over the next several years; whenever comes time for us to appoint another deacon or pastor among us, let us ask: does this

man display a humble heart that yearns to serve others? Does this man follow in the very example of Christ? I am so grateful that our current deacon models such servant-hearted leadership so well for us, by the Lord's grace.

But this call to serve one another is not easy. In fact, Christ reminds us here that we should *expect to suffer* as we seek to follow Jesus in this way. Go back up a few verses, to Jesus's response to James, John, and their mother, in verse 22. After they ask to sit at his right and left, he replies, "'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 to whom it has been prepared by my Father.'"

When James and John asked to share in Jesus's glory, they didn't know what they were asking for. To share in the glory of His kingdom meant sharing in his "cup" of suffering. Jesus brought about His kingdom by bearing the cup of GOD's wrath and judgment against sin on the Cross; though they didn't realize it, when they asked Jesus to join in his glory, they were asking to join in his suffering and death! Jesus rebukes their aspiration for sitting at his right and left; but he does, in fact, tell them that they will join him in "drinking his cup." He tells them that they will, indeed, suffer with and for Christ, for the sake of the Kingdom. And we know that this is exactly what happened. In Acts, James is the first apostle to be martyred - persecuted to the point of death for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of Christ. AND his brother John, who went on to write five books of the New Testament, spent his final days in exile as punishment from the government for following Christ.

They wanted to share in Christ's glory. But they still didn't get it; the path to Jesus's crown lay through the cross; the path to honor and glory in the Kingdom of Heaven runs straight through suffering and death. If this is true for the *King* himself, then why would it not also be true for us? Once again, the way of the Kingdom of Heaven is upside-down from the way of the world; the way up is down; the way to glory is through humble service, the way of the slave; the way to life is death.

One commentator writing on this passage put it very well: “To ask for worldly wealth and much honor is often to ask for anxiety, temptation, disappointment, and envy; in the spiritual arena, to ask for great usefulness and reward is often to ask for great suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

We must be willing to suffer for the sake of Christ as we seek to serve him, even as we seek to serve others. We must be willing to serve others when it’s inconvenient. We must be willing to have our acts of service for others go unnoticed, without any kind of recognition or thanks for it. In fact, we must even be willing to lose our reputation, even to be thought *less of* by others because of our obedience to Christ and acts of servant-hearted kindness to others. This forces us to ask ourselves: am I only willing to do the right thing if it makes me look good, or benefits me in some way? Or do I really love Christ and others so much that I’m willing to glorify God and serve them when it means people will get upset with me for it? Or look down on me and be disappointed? Or maybe not even know about it at all?”

We must be willing to suffer for and serve Christ by humbly serving others. Because, after all, Jesus Christ Himself did this for us! He “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (v.28).

Which brings us to our final point:

### **III. We Must Remember that Christ, the True King, Lord, and Savior, Came to Serve Us, Even through Suffering and Death (vv. 17-9, 28-34)**

The last section of our text today, vv.29-34, might not seem to go along with the rest of our text at first. In fact, at first blush, it doesn’t really seem to go with the sections coming before or after it. In these verses, we see a bit of an abrupt transition as they keep traveling and come across two blind men. They repeatedly cry out to Jesus in faith, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” in verse 30. The crowd rebukes him, not thinking that just insignificant, weak, and helpless people just bother Jesus or take away from his time. But once again, Jesus reveals his incredible compassion for the weak and needy - especially for those who *understand* just how weak and needy they are! - and he stops, has compassionate mercy, and heals them, opening the eyes of the blind!

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 3rd edition, vol. 9 (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2010), p. 488.

This is yet another beautiful picture of the Lord's compassionate ministry of healing, mercy, and grace. But we have to ask: why did Matthew include this story? We've already seen basically the same kind of story happen, back in chapter 9, where Jesus healed two blind men, along many other stories of miracles and healings (which *doesn't* seem to be the emphasis here). So then, why does Matthew include another account when it is so similar? And why does he put it *here*, especially when Matthew typically groups passages together thematically? I think the answer is because this short account embodies the very example of Christ's servant-hearted humility we just talked about.

These blind men profess faith that Jesus, whom they can't even see, is the true Messiah, the "Son of David" - God's true, promised King, coming to fulfill God's promises and usher in the Kingdom! And Jesus himself had just told the disciples He is the "Son of Man," another Old Testament title referring to the Messiah - and he even alluded to the fact that He is the eternal God the Son, who existed for all of eternity, and willingly "came" down to earth, not to be served but to serve (v.28). Jesus's divine glory, power, and authority is revealed once more in this passion as he miraculously heals the blind men. And yet, strikingly, he uses his glorious power to *compassionately serve and heal others*, even while he is willingly marching towards his own suffering and death, just as verses 17-19 told us: Jesus is heading up to Jerusalem, "And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles, to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." Jesus has the power to heal and save others. Jesus even has the power to raise people from the dead - even for himself to be raised from the grave! Jesus could easily save himself from cruel mockery, suffering, and unjust execution. And yet he didn't. He willingly marched to Jerusalem, to the Cross, his own suffering and death. He is the Messiah, the true King, the GOd Man, the Lord over all! He deserves all glory, honor, and praise! And yet, he set that aside, came not to be served, but to serve, and willingly went to be *mocked and humiliated* by those who should have bowed the knee and praised him.

Why? Why would the glorious God and King over all do such a thing? Because He came to "give his life as a ransom for many." He came to give up his own life - to suffer and die unjustly - so that we might live! Every single one of us is a sinner. Every single one of us is full of pride. We've all rebelled sinfully rebelled against God; we've all tried to dethrone Him, to put ourselves in charge, to be our own ruler, our own King, our own God! We have all tried to rob

God of His glory and give it to ourselves. We do this every time we seek our own honor and glory. We do this every time we disobey God and sin. Every single one of us has rebelled and sinned against God, and we justly deserve His eternal wrath and judgment in Hell. And yet, gloriously, *Jesus Christ, the very King we have wronged - the very King we rebelled against, the very King we tried to dethrone - came to serve us by laying down his life for us, by suffering and dying on the cross in our place!* If you're trusting in Christ alone this morning, He took your sin upon Himself and drank the cup of God's wrath that we deserve so that *we will never have to drink it!* And when we believe in Christ, we die to our sin with Him so that we will be raised to eternal life with Him! Praise the Lord for this glorious good news - the gospel of Jesus Christ!

So if we truly believe this gospel - then how can we continue trying to rebel, dethrone Christ, and live for our glory? May it not be so! Let us fix our eyes on the gospel; let us follow in the example of Christ, walking with him in *servanthood* as we follow him to *eternal life in the glory of His Kingdom*.

And if you're not a believer in Christ this morning, I plead with you to turn to him and trust in Him alone for your salvation. Die to yourself, to your pride, and to your sin by turning to Christ in faith, so that you may live! And then, make your faith public by being baptized and joining Christ's church, as we seek to follow Him together. If you have any questions about this gospel and becoming a Christian, or about baptism or joining this church, I would love to speak with you. You can come now, or find me after the service. Let us pray.