

Becoming a Servant-Minded Community

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. The Lord's word for us this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, 17 through 28.

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the twelve aside and said to them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law.

They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day, he will be raised to life.

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. 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.

[1 : 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. 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. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 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.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

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. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. Thank you, Brian. Good morning. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here at Christ Church. And it's great to be with you. I'm sharing God's word with you this morning.

[2 : 35] Will you pray with me? Lord God, we have not come to witness a powerful preacher, but to encounter your powerful word spoken to us from the lips of Jesus.

And I just ask that we would so experience the Spirit, so encounter your Son, that we'd be changed by the ordinary preaching of your word.

So make much of our little. Do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right, so I'm not sure if Cody and Stevie Texan are tuning in, but I did want to give them a shout out.

They just had their newborns this week safely. We're super happy about that. Yeah, I'm super excited for them. First-time parents, beautiful little boys, twins, Samuel and Luke Texan.

We'll call them the Texan twins, all right? The Texan twins. And, you know, this really got me reminiscing about my first time as a parent. That was four years ago. Kami is four now.

[3 : 50] And I just remember four years ago holding that little baby girl in my arms, fresh out of the womb. And I was like, man, I want this girl to be great. I want her to be great.

And so I did all the things, right? Skin on skin time with mommy and daddy. I read to her. I sang to her. I smothered her with affection. I even tried to enhance her physical capabilities.

Just one day old, I was like having her bounce up on my lap trying to make her do baby squats. I would touch her fingers to increase her tactile senses and let her touch a bunch of different things

to increase her dexterity.

I put a basketball next to her to familiarize her with the game. I just, I really wanted her to be great. An absolutely great human being according to all the metrics of greatness, at least in my mind. And imagine that's what Cody and Stevie want for their boys. It's what all of the parents in this room probably want for their kids, what all of our parents probably wanted for us. We all want to be great. And we all want those we love to be great.

[4 : 52] And it was no different in the days of Jesus than it is today when a mother, not unlike any other parent in this room, approached her Messiah King, seeking the greatness of her beloved boys, two of Jesus' innermost disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

And yet what we see here is that in typical Jesus fashion, he neither denies nor grants this short-sighted request, but instead he points them beyond themselves, beyond their present understandings of who he is and what true greatness is.

And he points them to a far more profound understanding of himself and of true greatness. He points them to the fact that when we miss the crux of the cross, we miss the greatness of greatness. And that's God's word to us today. When we miss the crux of the cross, we miss the greatness of greatness. Now let's set the scene here first. Look with me at verse 17.

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. So this is his final journey, his journey to the cross. And you just can imagine the things that he's feeling on his way there, right? And so it's not surprising that he wants to talk about what's heaviest upon his heart with his crew.

[6 : 01] So it says, Like remember, he's got quite an entourage, but it says he takes his closest friends aside, wanting to share with them what's on his heart, what's on his mind.

And even though he's shared this at least twice with them already in Matthew's gospel account, and even though they typically seem to not really understand what he's talking about or just kind of seem to brush it off normally, he tries to be vulnerable with them again.

And he wants them to know. He wants to prepare them for what's going to happen. So he says to them in verse 18, And what he does is he gives them even more information than he'd previously given them.

In verse 19, he says that he's going to be delivered to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. And he says on the third day he will be raised to life. So imagine you're his close friends, and he pulls you aside and he spills his guts to you like this.

And he's not only your close friend, he's the one you believe to be the Messiah, the one who you believe is sent from God, right? The authoritative voice of God, the prophetic voice right there with you. How might you respond to all these things that Jesus just said about his crucifixion and his resurrection?

[7 : 17] You would think that his closest friends would be distressed, right? Or if they didn't understand, they'd be like, you know, tell me more, please. I mean, Jesus was saying some pretty wild things, right?

Condemned by the chief priests in the temple, flogged and mocked by both the Jewish establishment and Gentile Romans, crucified, and then like raised from the dead?

What are you talking about? Raised from the dead. But what verse? But what does verse 20 say? What does verse 20 say? Right after Jesus speaks about his crucifixion and his resurrection, there is no consolation.

There are no questions. It's like he hasn't said anything at all. Verse 20, Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and kneeling down asked something from him. And you know the NIV says asked a favor of him, but I think that's actually too generous in my opinion. In the Greek, it actually says she asked something from him. Like she's out to just get something from him.

[8 : 17] And so he asked her in verse 21, what do you want? What do you desire? And she commands him. She gives an imperative. In the Greek, it's not actually grant, but it says say.

She says, Say, Jesus, Say that these two sons of mine may sit at your right and left. Effectively, make them your prime minister and your chief of staff in your kingdom.

And if that seems like an incredibly awkward transition from verse 19 to 20, it is. It is an awkward transition. But you know, I think that this gospel writer knew exactly what he was doing by recording this major non sequitur.

And I spent a lot of time this week trying to figure out, puzzling as to why this chapter was written the way that it is. Like what was the logical flow between verse 19 and verse 20? Like why would anyone think it was cool or okay or natural to so abruptly change the topic of conversation and the flow of thought to demand something of Jesus after he'd just gotten vulnerable with them, sharing what was on his heart with his dearest friends about some really deep stuff like being mocked and flogged and crucified.

But then it hit me. This transition from verse 19 to verse 20 was probably supposed to strike me as odd and discordant. And not only was this inappropriate and awkward of James and John and their mom, but I think God was trying to show me this week that this wasn't just a reflection of the Zebedee family, but it was also a mirror reflecting me.

[9 : 46] And how I too so often approach the Lord, my King, my Messiah, not as the King of Kings crucified in my place, but more as a genie than a sacrificial master.

It's a reflection of how I so often ignore the main thing that Jesus is about, the main thing that's on his heart, and instead bring to him the things on my own self-centered agenda list.

And we all do this. We do this all the time, don't we? Like if someone asks us, how can I pray for you? What do we say? We ask people to pray that God would help us achieve our own self-determined goals toward our own greatness, right?

That God would help me do well in my test. That he would help me do well in my performance. That he would grant me favorable outcomes at work, right? Better circumstances to make me great. To make me great at whatever it is I'm pursuing.

We all do this. I'm preaching right now, and I probably asked someone this week, can you just pray that God would give me a good sermon to preach? Make me a good preacher? Give me good pastoral counsel? But you know, if we only ever approach Jesus as an all-powerful king, and not as a crucified king, we will only ever approach him wrongly.

[10 : 57] We will only ever pray the wrong kinds of prayers, and missing the crux of the cross, we will miss the greatness of true greatness, his greatness. Now look, I'm not saying that these kinds of prayers should never come upon our lips, or that God doesn't care about our lives, or the things that we ask for.

In fact, he does. He cares more than we do about our lives, and he wants us to bring every little thing on our minds, on our hearts, to him. I would even say that God wants us to be great. Notice, Jesus doesn't rebuke or reproach the Zebedee family here.

He doesn't scold them for being arrogant, or prideful, or selfish, or worldly. Like, who do you think you are? How dare you pursue greatness? No, Jesus doesn't have anything against greatness, or ambition, in and of itself.

In fact, in the scriptures, the scriptures teach that we are wired, to pursue greatness. It's part of what it means to be human, to be made in the great, and glorious image of God, to fulfill God's first words to humanity, to be fruitful, and to multiply those fruit, and to expand over the earth, and to rule the earth, and to exercise dominion, as children of our kingly creator.

We should all want to be great, because God made us to be great. In our classrooms, in our workplaces, in our families, our relationships, in our hobbies, as students, employees, employers, as parents, siblings, spouses, athletes, artists, scientists, professionals, to use and develop the gifts he's given to each of us to be a blessing to the world.

[12 : 25] Because our greatness reflects God's greatness. It's like what Eric Liddell said, the Olympians, in that movie, The Chariots of Fire, said this to his sister, I believe that God made me for a purpose.

He made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. It's not just fun. To win is to honor him.

So the Zebedee family's desire for greatness wasn't wrong. But what was wrong was their understanding of greatness. That's what went wrong. See, what went wrong with their understanding of greatness is that they only understood half the gospel.

They only understood half the gospel. Yes, James and John and their mother rightly believed Jesus is king. Jesus is Messiah. It even says she knelt before him. They clearly understood something of Jesus' greatness.

And they sought their own greatness by proximity to his. That's right. That's good. But what they failed to understand was the other half of the gospel. That Jesus would be a crucified king.

[13 : 32] And that his true greatness didn't just come from some generic crown upon his head but specifically from his crown of thorns. See, by ignoring Jesus' vulnerable discussion about the suffering he was about to face, by missing the crux of the cross, they were missing the greatness of his greatness.

And so what Jesus does is he gently and patiently tries to redirect them to his cross and to the truth about what real greatness is about. So I want to have us turn our attention now to Jesus' teaching on true greatness.

Look with me at verse 22. In verse 22, it's clear to Jesus that they have no idea what true greatness is. You don't know what you are asking, he says.

And so the first thing he does is he tries to help them connect the dots between his cross and his greatness. And so he asks them, can you drink the cup I am going to drink?

I'm going to explain more about that cup in a minute, but what you at least need to know is that it's not a desirable thing to drink this cup. It's the same cup that Jesus desperately pleads with his Father about in the garden.

[14 : 40] Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken away from me. Yet not what I will, but yours be done. And it's a cup of suffering and sorrow and anguish and loneliness and forsakenness.

And so by asking this question, Jesus is indicating that the way to greatness involves drinking a bitter cup, a bitter cup of suffering and hardship. He's saying that the road to greatness isn't a walk in the park.

It's costly. It's hard to swallow. It's not just a matter of asking your mom to get you a nice seat next to the king. No. It's like Dr. King said, nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice.

It's costly. Jesus says to the sons of Zebedee, do you really know what it takes, what it costs? Are you really able to drink this cup all the way down to the last, most bitter dregs?

And it's not quite clear that they do understand what Jesus is communicating to them about the bitter cost of greatness in his kingdom. Because James and John are like, yeah, we can drink it. We got this.

[15 : 39] Yeah, Jesus, we'll be your cup bearers, whatever it takes to share your greatness. We can pay it. We can pay the cost. But really, they have no idea. So Jesus continues in verse 23. He says, well, you say you can and I can even tell you now that you will indeed drink from my cup, but regardless, to sit at my right or left, it's not for me to grant.

These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father, Jesus says. And this is the next thing that we learn about greatness. It not only involves a bitter cup, but ultimately, greatness is judged and decided by the Father.

Jesus, their great Messiah and King is setting for them an example of greatness. And it's not about seizing authority, but rather submitting to authority. The authority of our Father in heaven.

Jesus is saying, look guys, honestly, I myself, the Messiah, I don't even have the authority to grant who will be at my right or my left because even I am under the authority of my Father.

And He decides, not me. You guys want to be at my left and right in the kingdom, but don't forget whose kingdom this is. How did I teach you to pray? Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

[16 : 49] Your kingdom come. Your will be done. And Jesus consistently points them back to not my will be done, but my Father's. You know, in Mark's gospel account of this story, the two sons are recorded saying to Jesus, they say, teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.

And I think this is, this really betrays, I think, their understanding of greatness in the kingdom of God. They think that greatness is about getting whatever you want, having that much authority. And that's what so many of us think when we think of greatness as well, don't we? We think of power. We think of authority. We think of self-determination. When I put my basketball, right, into my newborn Cammie's hands, what was I thinking?

I want her to dominate, all right? I want her to dominate on the court. I want her to have her way with her opponents. When I read to her, what was I thinking? I want her to be great at school.

I want her to be able to get into whatever school she wants, right? But what if greatness isn't about ascending to some status where we can always have our way, where we can always impose our will?

[18 : 00] What if greatness is submission to the Father's way? What if the best and greatest way to be human is not freedom from the Father, but following the Father? Like, think about that for a second.

If greatness is about getting our own way and it's not about going God's way, what kind of a world would that lead to? Everyone pursuing greatness and thus everyone pursuing the power and authority to go their own way.

What would ensue? What would ensue but vicious, cutthroat competition and division and hatred? And I mean, that's exactly what happens here with the other ten disciples. Verse 24 says, they're indignant.

Yo, bro, you asked your mom, you tried to use your mom to manipulate Jesus into one upping us in the kingdom of God? Their misunderstanding of greatness only turned community into competition and friendships into fighting.

So Jesus sets all of them straight in verse 25. You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials or as it says in the Greek, the great ones exercise authority over them. [19:07] And what he's saying is that in every other kingdom, in every other kingdom, rulers are overlords and the great ones wield authority. And to them, this makes complete sense, right? Because why wouldn't rulers rule over those who are under them?

And why wouldn't the great ones exercise authority over the lesser ones, right? But according to Jesus, verse 26, not so with you. Not so in my kingdom, he says, for unlike any other, Jesus' kingdom is an upside-down kingdom.

With no social hierarchy, it's ordered by an economy of love and service. Verse 26, not so with you, Jesus says. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

And you have to understand that especially in Jesus' ancient pre-Christian world, ruling, not serving, was the greatest status. A servant worked for hire to maintain their master's property. And a slave was forced into service, right? As one commentator puts it, a slave was virtually a non-person, someone with no rights, no existence of their own.

[20:15] Rather, they existed solely to serve others. Doesn't that sound awful? Like, these are the lowest, the lowest possible positions in society that Jesus is talking about.

And yet, what he's doing here is he's reversing their status to great and first in the kingdom economy. And not in some, like, abstract, conceptual, idealistic way, but he makes it personal. He holds himself the king of kings, the king of the kingdom of God to the same standard. And he offers himself as the prime example of this servant-hearted, even self-sacrificing greatness. Verse 27. And whoever wants to be first must be your slave, 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.

Jesus points them to true greatness by pointing them to his cross. He's saying, I'm the Messiah. I'm the king. And even I didn't come to be served, but to serve.

[21:16] And not just to serve, but to sacrifice, to sacrifice my whole life as a ransom. So according to Jesus, greatness doesn't primarily consist in getting, but in giving. Not in asserting supremacy, but in assuming servanthood.

And Jesus calls every citizen of his kingdom, both then and now today, to pursue this kind of greatness through self-denying, sacrificial service after the pattern of his cross.

Now I wish I could end the sermon here, right? But I'm pretty sure that for a lot of us, myself included, like for those of us who've grown up in the church, and honestly, even for those of us here who aren't even Christians, a sermon like this probably seems pretty standard, unsurprising, and therefore redundant, and probably uninspiring, right?

No duh, Pastor Andrew. Of course a Christian minister is going to get behind the pulpit and say something like this. Yeah, we got it. Be more like Jesus. Serve more like Jesus. Love more like Jesus.

Sacrifice more like Jesus. Okie dokie. I'll try harder this week. I'll try harder to wash a few more dishes at home, right? To give a little bit more effort at work.

[22:27] To block out Saturday, June 24th, on my calendar for the next Project Peace day of service, right? How's that for sacrificial service? I got this.

I got this. And I don't at all mean to discourage or downplay any such resolutions. But if try harder is all that you've heard today, then I've totally failed you and you haven't heard the gospel.

Dude, this isn't some moralistic, love your neighbor better, give more, serve more sermon. If all we heard from Jesus today is a challenge to make some moderate behavioral modifications, then I'm afraid we all have still missed the crux of the cross and the greatness of greatness.

Like really, if our only takeaway from Jesus' words here is to just moderately try a little bit harder to love our neighbors like Jesus, then honestly, we're probably not actually pursuing the greatness that God wants for us.

But some other kind of greatness, another kind of greatness patterned more after a conventional crown than Jesus' crown of thorns. And if that's the case, then we have totally missed the crux of the cross and the greatness of Jesus' greatness.

[23 : 42] greatness. And we need to be honest with ourselves if that's the case. Because if that's the case, the good news about Jesus isn't actually very good news to us.

And we can't even call it a gospel. Like perhaps the good news of Jesus that the way up is down, that the cross precedes the crown, that it is better to give than to receive.

Perhaps this news about God becoming a servant and humbling himself unto death on a cross to pay the ransom for his beloved people, perhaps we find this to be more of a threat to our pursuit of greatness than actual good news.

Maybe we prefer alternate empires and don't actually want to live in a kingdom where just anyone can be great not through self-assertion but through self-abandonment.

You see, that's what we really need to consider this morning. Not just whether we understand Jesus' teaching about greatness with our heads and not even just whether we are copying Jesus' model of greatness with our hands, we need to consider whether we are truly convinced of Jesus' cross-shaped greatness in our hearts.

[24 : 49] Whether we believe what he says about true greatness and greatness' inextricable link to his cross. Or else, all this stuff about self-denial and submission and sacrifice and service, not only will we never be able to live it out, but we won't want to because it won't make any sense to us.

See, if we only read this passage of Scripture as a word from Jesus about how we're supposed to live and die for others just like he did, we've missed the most important part of what he's saying. Like, yes, we ought to live and die for others like Jesus, but it's only when we first realize that he is the one who has lived and died for us. That we will ever even understand how we can do the same for others.

The crux of the cross is that the bitter cup reserved for us. The bitter cup was reserved for us. The cup, the prophets and the psalmists spoke about foaming with bitter wrath and judgment reserved for all those who neglected to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before their God.

The poison cup, every single one of us deserve to drink. Jesus, though it was his worst nightmare and though he deserved nothing but the sweetest overflowing cup in the banquet of banquets in heaven, he drank our cup in our place.

[26 : 15] The creator of the universe came into the world, but his existence among us was not to be served as the creator that he is, but rather to serve his creatures as the savior that he chose to become graciously, voluntarily.

And he gave his life in the place of our lives as a ransom to purchase our liberation. And guess what? The scriptures tell us that therefore, precisely because he humbled himself and became a servant unto death on a cross, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

The crucified servant is the great and exalted one, risen and seated on high. And this, this is the gospel. Good news of a better kingdom.

Good news of a better identity, a better purpose. Good news of a better way to live. The good news that Jesus' greatness was not for the purpose of serving himself, nor our greatness for the purpose of serving ourselves.

The gospel is the only news that can liberate us from our slavery to ourselves and make us cheerful, sacrificial servants. This transformational news of the crucified and exalted Christ.

[27 : 39] Now, can you imagine? Can you imagine what kind of a spirit-filled people the church might be if we believed this liberating gospel? If we inhabited this upside-down kingdom?

And if we went forth into our schools, into our neighborhoods, into our workplaces, our clubs, our homes, subverting all the broken hierarchies and insisting upon being servants, willing to give all of ourselves for the sake of others.

What if we were the kind of people that bore witness to a cross-shaped greatness, pursuing the liberation of all those held captive to all these lesser kingdoms other than the kingdom of Christ?

That's what the greatest of Christ's citizens do. Because in Christ, every obstacle has already been removed. We don't need to worry about being served.

We don't need to be worried about being served anymore. Because Christ has already served us to the full. No more vying to sit at His right or left. We are happily seated with Him in the heavenly places.

[28 : 45] No more giving begrudgingly out of our scarcity. We can give lavishly of ourselves, even unto death, giving out of the spring of His abundant resurrection life.

Because Christ Church, ours is the greatness of Christ. The cross-shaped greatness of Christ. A very existence on this planet, not primarily for ourselves, but for the good of the city.

For the glory of Christ. And that's the kind of people He's wanting to make us into. Will you pray with me? Lord, we confess that being a servant is not attractive to us.

But as soon as we confess that, we realize that that must mean that Jesus is not that attractive.

Help us to see the beauty of a God who became a servant.

and help us to be so ravished by that truth that you make us cheerful servants ourselves. Pouring ourselves out.

[29 : 55] Not in a legalistic way, but out of love for Christ. The one who loved us, gave Himself for us. A ransom.

The one who drank the cup for us. We soften our hearts to the gospel, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.