

The greatness of the servant

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 20 and we're going to read from verse 17. And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the 12 disciples aside and on the way he said to them, see we're going up to Jerusalem and the son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the 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. Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons and leading 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're asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I'm 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 10 heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called to 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 will 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.

Well, a year ago, the Telegraph newspaper published a list of things to do before you die. Among them were seeing the Northern Lights, visiting the Taj Mahal, the Great Barrier Reef, the Grand Canyon and the Great Wall of China. Now, whether or not you visited any or perhaps all of them, I wonder what would be on your list? What do you want to do before you die?

What would make your life complete? What is it that you really want? It's a question Jesus asks in our passage today. What do you want?

And the answer most of us would give is that we want a bigger house. We want to convert our loft. Or we want to be parents. Or we want our children to get into that top school. Or we want to be promoted at work. Or to have no financial worries ever again. The truth is, most of us want, well, whatever one else wants. But Jesus says that we should want the opposite of the people around us. Jesus says in our passage, it shall not be so among you. See, what's at stake in our passage today is that if we ignore what Jesus says, we'll be no different from the world around us. People will look at Christians and they'll say, well, they talk of following Jesus, but they're no different from the rest of us. They want, well, what everyone else wants. The passage we're looking at today comes in the middle of a series of examples about how the kingdom of heaven is different from the kingdom of this world. Have a look, perhaps, in your Bibles back at Matthew chapter 18, just a page or two back. Matthew chapter 18, verse 1. Jesus' followers ask him, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In other words, when God brings history to a close and makes a new world, which he's promised as he goes on to talk about in the next few chapters, who is in and who is out? If you've been here over the past few weeks, you'll know that we've been working through a series called Turning the World Upside Down. The people who are in God's kingdom are the opposite of what you'd expect. So in chapter 19, we saw that to get into God's kingdom, we need to be like humble children and not to hold on to our wealth.

[4 : 3 1] In the first part of chapter 20, last time, we saw that working harder than other people doesn't guarantee us a better place. God's kingdom is not what we'd expect. And as Jesus says in chapter 20, verse 16, just before our passage, the last will be first and the first last. Many of you know, I guess, that London buses can be a law unto themselves, can't they?

They can change their destination halfway along and they can decide to kind of start or stop wherever they please. And one of the more frustrating things is when you're waiting patiently in a queue for a bus, you've managed to get near enough to front to be guaranteed a place on the bus

and the bus stops at the back of the queue. Instead of being first, you're last. It's the opposite of what you were expecting. And that's a bit what God's kingdom is like. If you want to be first, if you want to better yourself, if you chase after the things of this world, you're in danger of being last. In our passage today, Jesus tells us three things which his disciples and we weren't expecting, things which turn the idea of God's kingdom on its head. And the first is that the king came to die. That's from verses 17 to 19. The king came to die. Have a look with me at verse 17. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he tells his disciples for the third time that he must suffer and die. He's already mentioned it in chapter 16 verse 21 and 17 verse 22, but he adds it this time again that he's going to die at the hands of Gentiles, non-Jews, presumably the Roman authorities. And a king who dies, well, doesn't seem like much of a king, does he? But Jesus says this is the whole reason that he came. Throughout history, there's been all kinds of leaders who've been recognized for their life, what they did, what they taught, and how they influenced the world. I wonder if that's how you think about Jesus. Great teaching, maybe even great miracles. But his death is a bit of an embarrassment, isn't it? A tragic death aged 33. I mean, imagine what he could have done if he'd carried on for 10 or 20 years more. But Jesus' death wasn't an accident. It wasn't a tragedy. In fact, Matthew spends lots of time in his gospel explaining how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that he was born to die, to free his people from their sin, from their rebellion against God.

[7 : 16] I wonder if you noticed the very last verse that we read a few minutes ago in verse 28, that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus' death made it possible for us to be in God's kingdom, to be God's friends. In 1975, the Montaneros, the largest of the Argentinian guerrilla organizations, received no less than \$60 million for the ransom of two brothers, George and Juan Born, who'd acquired great wealth of grain traders. And that amounts to over \$300 million in today's money, the highest recorded ransom ever paid. Someone wanted them freed so much they were willing to pay an unbelievably high price. But of course there is a higher ransom than this, paid not with money, but with blood. Jesus gave his life as a ransom, not for two brothers, but for all who will follow him.

He gave his life as a ransom for you, if you will turn to him. I wonder how you feel about following a king who died, a king whose greatest achievement, well, was his death. Perhaps you're a bit ashamed of it.

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, was ashamed. In chapter 16, verse 22, Peter rebukes Jesus and says, no way. You can't die. You're the king. I don't want to follow someone who died on a cross. I mean, it just looks so pathetic. But there was no other way for us to be friends with God. The king had to die.

The story is told of a young girl who grew up ashamed of her mother's hands. And whenever she arrived at school, she'd let go of her mother's hands as quickly as she could, for fear that anyone else would see them. Because her mother's hands were badly burnt. They were really unattractive. Raw skin, old blisters. It even stopped her inviting friends to her house sometimes, because she was so embarrassed. But one day, she learned how her mother's hands were burnt. It had been in a fire at that old house when she was only a baby. Her mother had saved her from the flames, picked her up in her hands, and carried her to safety. But in the process, had got badly burnt. And of course, that changed everything. The girl was no longer ashamed of her mother's hands, because they had saved her life.

[9 : 57] They had rescued her. And Jesus' death on a cross 2,000 years ago, it can seem embarrassing. It seems weak and pathetic. But when we see what it achieved, when we see how it rescued us, we're no longer ashamed. There was no other way for the girl to be rescued by her mother. And there was no other way for us to be friends with God. The king died for us. And the king who died is the king that we follow. And that brings us to the second point, which is that following the king is suffering rather than privilege. And that's from verse 20 to 23. Following the king is suffering rather than privilege. Have a look down with me at verse 20. The mother of the sons of Zebedee comes to Jesus. She kneels before him, and she asks him for something. And elsewhere in the Bible, we learn that her sons were James and John. She may well be the sister of Jesus' mother Mary, which means that James and John may well be Jesus' cousins. In which case, she may well be using her family connections to get what she wants. And I suppose she wouldn't be the first person to try and do that. And Jesus asked her the question we were thinking about at the beginning. What do you want?

What would you say? A place at Oxbridge? A place in the school's first rugby team? A successful career in the city? She asks him for a place of honor, to sit at Jesus' right and Jesus' left in his kingdom.

She acknowledges he's the king. But in contrast to his words about suffering, she asks for glory. And Jesus says to her and her sons, you do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink? And they said to him, we are able. Imagery of a cup in the Old Testament is sometimes used as a picture of blessing, such as in Psalm 23, many of you may know, verse 5, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. And maybe that's what James and John thought Jesus meant a cup of glory, a cup of blessing. But in Jeremiah chapter 25 and Isaiah chapter 51, the image of a cup is used to represent God's anger at rebellion and as a cup of suffering. And given what Jesus has just said about going to Jerusalem to die, it's clear he's using it to represent suffering rather than blessing. They think it's a cup of glory, but actually it's a cup of suffering. And Jesus says in verse 23, doesn't he, you will drink this cup. They will suffer. And James was the first disciple to be martyred in Acts chapter 12, verse 2, and John was exiled, as he says in Revelation 1, verse 9. See that the privileged status of perhaps being Jesus' cousins counted for nothing, didn't it? Following Jesus is to go the way of suffering rather to enjoy the privilege of comfort. So I wonder what you expect the Christian life to be like. Perhaps you've grown up in a Christian family where Jesus has always been relatively well thought of, and it's been relatively easy being a Christian. But then you go to school or university and people don't want to know. They think you're weird, narrow-minded and stupid for being a Christian. Perhaps they're even openly hostile. And the question is, are you surprised? Do you expect being a Christian to be a comfortable ride? Would Jesus turn to you and say, you don't know what you're asking? Will you really follow me? Perhaps you're sitting here and you're kind of weighing up whether to follow Jesus or not.

[14:06] See, being part of God's kingdom, the new world that he will make sounds great. But you're not so keen on this suffering. Can't you have Christianity without suffering? Well, imagine new army recruits signing up to be part of the army. They endure months of fitness training and weapons training and team exercises. And after all the preparations for fighting the front line, they get a call from their commander saying that they're flying to a war zone next week and they should say goodbye to their loved ones because they may never see them again. Imagine one of the recruits saying, well, hang on a minute. You're saying that I might die. I didn't sign up for this. But of course, the possibility of dying in combat is exactly what he did sign up for. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous pastor who was killed for protesting against the Nazis, wrote in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. When Christ bids a man, he calls him, come and die. I wonder how you feel about suffering for being a Christian. Jesus says that we should expect it. If Jesus faced death, as do many Christians around the world today, we shouldn't be surprised if we are rejected for following him.

The danger is that if we don't expect to suffer like James and John, it will come as a shock and then we'll feel like giving up on the whole thing. The king suffered and following this king means suffering rather than privilege. But thirdly and finally, Jesus also says that following the king is service rather than status and that's from verses 24 to 28. Following the king is service rather than status. Have a look down with me at verse 24 in the passage. When the other disciples find out that the sons of Lebedee have asked to sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom, they start to get angry. And it's not because they're horrified at their arrogance. It's because they're jealous.

See, they wanted to sit at Jesus' right and Jesus' left too. The disciples were arguing amongst themselves who was the greatest, who's going to get the best seats in God's kingdom. So Jesus says that if they want to follow him, they must be servants. Have a look at what Jesus says in verse 25.

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 wants to be great among you must be your servant.

[16:49] Whoever would be first among you must be your slave. Even as Jesus himself, the son of man, the king, came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

Malcolm Forbes was an exceptionally wealthy American entrepreneur and publisher of the *Forbes* magazine in the 1950s and 60s. And he was well known for his extravagant lifestyle. And he's often quoted as having said, he who dies with the most toys wins. For Malcolm Forbes, wealth and status

was everything. And it gave him great power. And it was the same in Jesus' day. The Romans loved exercising authority over other people. At the height of their power, they controlled a quarter of the globe. Only as much land and as many people as possible, it was what they aspired to. And isn't that what people aspire to today? In Dulwich, in London, to get as much stuff as possible, to earn the most, to climb the career ladder, to be constantly bettering themselves. In contrast, Jesus says, if you want to be great, you must be a servant. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you really want to be great, don't serve yourself. Serve others.

I wonder what your motivation for serving others is. Think perhaps about something that you do at church here, to serve others. And ask yourself, well, would I still do it if no one could see me? Do I do it purely for the good of what I'm doing? I suppose the setup team here at church is a good example of genuine service because no one sees them. They get here before everyone else arrives.

[18 : 37] You wouldn't necessarily know who they are. But it's not just at church, is it? Jesus doesn't say to us, it shall not be so among you at church. He says, it shall not be so among you at all.

So what about your workplace? Do you try and serve others or yourself? In a culture obsessed with climbing the career ladder and seeking status in our jobs, it's difficult to resist.

But we already have the greatest status we could need. We're children of God. We don't need to prove ourselves at all. What a relief. We're free to serve others. So rather than thinking, how can I serve myself in climbing the career ladder, I should ask, how can I serve others by doing my job well? Or perhaps it's a school you would love for your child to get into? You may well be serving them.

Education is a great gift from God. But isn't it partly the status of that particular school that you really want for your child? Giving them the best start in life will ultimately mean pointing them to Jesus. I guess part of the reason why we find it so difficult to serve others is that we don't really grasp what it meant for Jesus to serve us, to give his life for us. It remains a kind of abstract idea rather than a reality. Well imagine again the army troops that we thought about. You train for months for your mission and you eventually travel to the war zone and begin engaging in combat. One of your commanders, in a valiant effort to destroy any enemy base, manages to infiltrate the opposition. And he sends off a series of grenades which destroys the last artillery, preventing you from moving forward. But in the process he is blown up. He's given his life.

[20 : 33] Now at that choice you have a, at that moment you have a choice. The way is open. There's no more enemy fire. You can move forward. But imagine you decide to retreat. Well you say that the commander, he gave his life. But you know, we're just a bit tired. And I've got a headache and it's getting dark and I think we'll, I think we'll just go home. It'd be ridiculous wouldn't it? Because your commander gave his life. It's a small thing to keep going. To secure the enemy base and take advantage of a sacrifice he made. And because Jesus gave his life for us, it's a small thing to serve others by giving us of our time or our money. Being rejected by others is nothing compared to what he faced.

As a famous missionary, C.T. Studd, who gave up playing cricket for England to tell people about Jesus said, if Jesus Christ be God and died for me, there's nothing, there's no sacrifice that can be too great for me to make for him. So will you follow this king, the king who came to die?

Following him is not to be part of a privileged elite, as James and John thought, but to drink the cup of suffering, to be rejected. Following Jesus is not to be great in the world's eyes, but rather to serve others and put them first.

Perhaps you're sitting here and you're wondering, well why would anyone follow Jesus then? If this is what it means, forget it. Why would you choose such a difficult path?

Because Jesus says, this is the path that leads to life. As we saw last week in chapter 19, verse 29, Jesus had already said whoever follows him would receive a hundred times more than they could ever give up in this life and in the new world, eternal life, in the new world that God will make.

[22 : 36] Jesus didn't stay dead. He conquered death and paid our ransom so that we could be friends with God. And so following him means serving others rather than yourself, because the first will be last.

Let's pray, shall we? Father, thank you very much for Jesus, that he gave his life for us. Thank you, Father, that he served us in a way that we could never do. And we pray, Father, that you would help us to follow him, help us to get a way of suffering and service. Amen.