

# The Church's Service

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd like to echo Willie's welcome to all of you today. It's wonderful to have you gathered together and to come under God's word together from Matthew.

You might not know, but today is the last day for Matthew for this year. We start a new sermon series for Advent next week.

And so we're concluding this section, which is all about God's wisdom. And we heard last week that God's wisdom is often very, very upside down when it's thought of in a worldly way.

It turns the world's wisdom right on its head. And last week we heard about grace freely given in an undeserved way, bringing thanksgiving and blessing to those five o'clockers, which we all are part of.

We are all recipients of God's grace in a way that is bountiful and extravagant beyond measure. And this passage today shows us how we can respond to that.

[ 1 : 10 ] How do I live a grace-filled life in response to God's grace to me, in a way that's shaped by God's grace? And Jesus tells us very practically that the grace-filled life is all about serving.

It's about serving. This is the theme of this passage today. And I'd like you to turn to Matthew 20, and it's on page 825. In this passage, Jesus talks about greatness.

He actually talks about ambition. He says it's good to have ambition. You want to be great. But true greatness in God's kingdom is a bit different from what you might expect.

It is about serving. This week I was reading about serving in the world, and I came across a Forbes magazine article that was written last year, and it was called, Why Humble Leaders Make the Best Leaders.

And the author said, he begins by saying, when you're hiring for a leadership role, you might be overlooking one of the most important traits of top performers, humility.

[ 2 : 23 ] He said, I know this is counterintuitive. Actually, it's a thought that is counterproductive as well. He says, humility is not typically the first trait that comes to mind when you think of great business leaders like Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk or Bill Gates.

But, he said, many surveys say this. He cited a survey of 105 computer software and hardware firms published in the Journal of Management, and it revealed that humility in CEOs led to higher performing leadership teams, increased collaboration and cooperation, and flexibility in developing strategies.

And the other thing he said is, there's a famous book on leadership by Jim Collins called Good to Great, and he says there's two common traits of CEOs in companies that transition from average to superior market performance.

The first is humility, is the trait. And the second trait is a deep desire and will to advance the cause of the organization, and not one's own cause.

And so, this man closes the article by writing, he says, here's the bottom line. We tend to be impressed by charismatic candidates with powerful personalities and commanding presence.

[ 3 : 47 ] My advice? Dig deeper. Your gut reaction is often wrong. Search for quiet confidence, humility, and a focus on others.

That's where great leadership begins. Now, this writer is beginning to grasp what Jesus teaches his disciples in chapter 20.

He's seeing fruit of this. Jesus said that true greatness is all about this humble focus on others. And it is with the confidence that you serve with Jesus.

God created us for us. It's how we were designed to live together. It is the life of heaven. It is the life of the kingdom of God. And so, the question that Jesus answers is, how can we live a great kingdom of God life now?

And that's why he teaches us to serve in Matthew 20, 17 to the end. He does this in three ways. Jesus says that the foundation of our serving is the cross.

[ 4 : 57 ] And that's verses 17 through 19. And then he teaches what the great obstacle to our serving is. It is pride in verses 20 through 24. And then, finally, he teaches us the pattern and the power for our serving in verses 25 to the end of this chapter.

So, I want to look first at the foundation of our serving. You know, Jesus is on this home stretch to Jerusalem. He is determined to go to Jerusalem to die on a cross and rise again.

It's a 25 kilometer uphill walk from Jericho up to Jerusalem. And so, he is on the last day or so of the journey. And he takes the 12 disciples aside and shares with them again, for the third time, the great purpose, the great mission of his life.

In verse 18, he says, look, see, we are going 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. And here is the foundation of our serving. It is Jesus' cross.

[ 6 : 17 ] It is his suffering. It is his rising again in power. And we need to be really clear that Jesus is not just citing a prophecy here.

He is pouring out his heart to his disciples. And there is a deep sense of agony in what he is saying to them. We can't conceive the depth of his suffering and what he knows he will be facing very shortly.

He is going to be condemned by the leaders of God's people and delivered to Gentiles, God's people's enemies, to suffer horribly. He is going to be humiliated, tortured, and die in the most slow, agonizing way that humanity has invented.

And the far greater pain that he will experience is to take upon himself the pain and the horror of sin and evil and to know the separation from God that that brings.

He was forsaken so that we might not be forsaken. So he dreads what will happen. We know when we face something difficult or a painful physical thing, whether it's medical, that we dread this.

[ 7 : 33 ] This is far greater. He is coming into this situation, bearing a pain that he is sharing with his disciples. It's not a convenient serving that Jesus is about to undergo.

But that suffering, that amazing grace, is not the end of the story. If you look at the end, it says that he is raised on the third day, Jesus says.

Jesus never suffers without knowing that he will be infinitely rewarded for it and that he will one day be at the right hand of God the Father. That's how he approaches the suffering.

And this has a lot to say to you and I. Because you and I will never suffer. We will never go through pain and difficulty and inconvenience in our serving without knowing that you will also be rewarded, that you with Jesus will stand at the right hand of the Father, that you will see him face to face.

You always go through the darkness knowing that that is the truth, the foundational truth of our lives. So this amazing grace is the basis of how we live because it shows how we are loved in Jesus more than we could ask or think.

[ 8 : 55 ] See, Jesus is determined to go to the cross for us. If Jesus is for us in that way, who can be against us? And that gives the confidence in our serving.

He is behind you as the one who died for you. He is with you as your risen Lord. I am with you to the end of the age. And he is before you as your king who will come in glory, bringing heaven to earth.

So we serve with confidence. We serve with deep thanksgiving that it is a joyful work, even when it is hard service. It is the beginning place of our suffering and our serving.

Now, the great obstacle to serving is in verses 20 through 26. There's a realism about this teaching. And Jesus actually uses a real-life situation to teach a powerful thing about pride.

The Zebedee family, I don't know if you know about them, but James and John are close to Jesus. In fact, they're probably relatives, first cousins.

[ 10 : 03 ] Their mom is a woman named Salome, likely. And that woman is the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. So this is family that we're talking about. And James and John have been hearing Jesus speak about the kingdom of God, which we heard about a couple weeks ago.

They know and they believe, to their credit, that Jesus is the king. And they trust his promise from the last chapter that one day they will sit on 12 thrones when Jesus comes in glory to his glorious throne.

But shockingly, they choose this moment of agony that we're just talking about, of what he's sharing with them, to ask about the seating arrangements for the kingdom of God.

The seating arrangements. It's a picture of manipulation. They all come together, sons and mother, they're close relatives, and they ask for a favor.

Now, you might think, how could they say this? How could they choose this moment to do this?

Well, it is their need for influence and respect and power that blinds them to Jesus' amazing grace and what he has just been talking about.

[ 11 : 19 ] We have this inside of us as well, in small ways and sometimes very big ways. Pride has a firm hold of our human nature, and it prevents us from looking to Jesus crucified and risen for us.

It keeps us from seeing his agenda for us. And so the Zebedees and we strive to see that our needs are met, that our comforts are fulfilled, and that our agenda is carried forward.

And what happens then in that striving is to not be able to see God's needs, that God's agenda, his will for us.

We avoid inconvenience. And that's why their blind ambition, their pride, keeps them from seeing the light of what Jesus has just said to them about the cross.

Now, I want to say one more thing about pride here, because not only does it blind them to what Jesus is saying, it also drives them to a self-reliance.

[ 12 : 32 ] Jesus tells them, you don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? Now, the cup in the Old Testament is the cup of God's wrath.

And in Jeremiah 25, the cup is an image of God's wrath and judgment against all the nations that have persecuted Israel. And the prophecy is that they will have to, those nations will have to drink the cup right down to the dregs of God's wrath.

They will experience disaster from God. Now, we know that in the cross that Jesus has just been talking about, that Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath there for all people.

All judgment against sin, all judgment against evil, he drinks on the cross for us so that there can be the forgiveness of our sins.

This is my cup of salvation, Jesus says in communion, for the remission, for the forgiveness of sins.

And Jesus is saying, not that you can drink that cup of wrath, but can you share in my sufferings?

[ 13 : 42 ] Can you serve in sacrificial ways so that people hear and know the good news of Jesus for them? Can they see that?

And pride leads James and John to say very confidently, of course we can. We're able. Don't ask it a second time. But the self-reliance of pride is a massive obstacle to their serving and to our serving as well.

Because we very easily say in our hearts, I can do this, Lord. And we forget to pray, we forget to depend upon him as we serve.

But we cannot do anything for God without prayer. We cannot see his marvelous, gracious work without asking for his powerful work and his grace in us.

Last Monday, we met together as a church to pray at our quarterly prayer meeting. And it was very, very good to be there because we were living out what Jesus calls us to.

[ 14 : 51 ] To not only pray for the mission and the work and ministries of this church, but to actually live out this humbly coming to God for his help and his leading.

It's actually the pattern of life that God calls us to and we very, very easily forget. It's the same thing in your family and your work.

Jesus calls us every day to pray for God to help you to serve your family, your children, the people who are around you. Every day, God calls you to serve people in your workplace in Jesus' name.

And in order to do this, we need Jesus. We need each other. If we are to serve Jesus as he wants us to serve him, we come to him humbly saying, I need you.

I need your strength and your power and your leading today. Well, you can see how pride makes James and John really mess up their serve.

[ 15 : 55 ] But the other 10 disciples are no better. As soon as they hear about James and John's self-serving request, they are indignant. Now, they're upset not because they were insensitive to Jesus.

They didn't understand the cross. No. They're upset because they didn't get their request in first. They didn't jump the queue. And they probably said, how dare you get ahead of us?

This is what I was going to do. This is the place that I want to be in. Well, you might think Jesus should fire those disciples. They're a hopeless case.

They don't understand Jesus' purpose. They don't understand what it means to be part of his kingdom. But Jesus doesn't fire them. Instead, he calls them together.

And he said, you have just demonstrated what the kingdom of God is not. You've shown the way that the world understands greatness and it is all wrong. Now, I want to teach you about true greatness.

[16:58] Now, I think there's a word for us here because we all blow it all of the time with God. And it's our natural inclination to feel down about ourselves or to blame other people or to get angry with God.

And so we pull away from Jesus when we fail him. But Jesus, over and over again, you see it here, is revealed as our patient teacher, as our gracious Lord.

He doesn't fire us. He doesn't leave us. He draws us to himself just as he drew those disciples together and he says, yes, you've blown it, but here's the way I want you to live now.

This is the way to true greatness in the kingdom of God. And that's what he does with his disciples here. He says, there's two ways to live. One's right and one's wrong. You've just demonstrated the wrong one.

Let's look at the right way, the way of greatness. And Jesus does this. He teaches this in verses 25 through 28. It says there, you know that the true, the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.

[18:07] And they're great ones. They exercise authority, power over them. It shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

That was radical, upside down thinking in first century Palestine and it is today as well. If you look at the internet, the thing that makes people great is to have many followers, to be influencers.

You can make a lot of money being an influencer. You have to be able to carry out your agenda.

You must be liked by many to be great. And that is exactly what the disciples were hoping for.

But Jesus says, it shall not be so among you. If you want to be great, you must be a servant to the other disciples. And then he doubles down and he says, if you want to be first among all the 12, all you have to do is to be a slave.

A slave does not get paid anything. A servant at least gets a form of payment or a salary. The very greatest will expect nothing in return for their serving.

[19:25] But Jesus says, in doing that, you will receive everything. You will be first. This week, I saw a very heartwarming video.

And I don't know if you saw this. It has gone viral. But it is a video of a boy in a school in Minnesota. He's 12 years old and he has a very severe form of color blindness.

Now, his principal has the same sort of condition. And he found out about a pair of glasses that allows you to see in color. It's an extraordinary thing.

And they have a video of him where the principal comes over and he gives them the glasses in the middle of class. And he looks at them and you can see his face and he's nodding. And there's this smile and all of a sudden he bursts into tears.

And it's an awkward moment in the class because they don't know what to do with it. And they're talking about joy and tears. But they are tears of joy. And what he said is I can see everything.

[20:27] And the principal could relate to it. He said, yes. He said, isn't the world beautiful? It's like it's new. And this is the case with serving.

Jesus says, it is like, in a sense, putting on these new glasses. Our ambition is good, but it needs to be transformed. We are seeing in black and white with the ambition of this world, Jesus in this verse wants to transform our ambition into living color and to ask these ultimate questions of life.

What is it that Jesus wants in my life? What are the real needs of the people in my life? And how can I meet them? Jesus says, this is the kingdom life. This is the life of living color.

This transforms the way that we see everything around us. And you might ask, you know, is there not a danger that people who might take advantage of me, if I'm committed so much to service, and most certainly, there is a risk in our serving of being taken advantage of.

But Jesus wants us to meet real needs according to his leading, which may mean that there are times when we say no in our serving. Jesus just said this to the Zebedees.

[ 21 : 49 ] He said no to them. There were boundaries so that he could lead and serve according to God's ways, according to his plan. So part of your, and if you're a parent, you know about this, part of your sacrificial servant leadership is to correct and lead in a godly direction.

You say no to certain wants because you want the very best for the person that you are serving. You serve them in a way that draws them to Jesus Christ. This is a wonderful way of expressing the greatness of serving, to give ourselves and asking those questions.

What is the need of those around me? Now, you might be thinking, how can I actually live like this? It's hard. It is radical. It is different from the values of the world, and it is inconvenient very often.

Well, the last point as we leave this passage that I want to close with is that Jesus himself is our pattern and the power to serve.

And I want you to look at this verse 28. This is the most precious verse, I think, in the gospel, at least one of them. And this is, I think this is something that you and I should have as our homework this week, that we memorize this verse because it is absolutely central to life in the kingdom of God.

[ 23 : 17 ] Even, look at verse 28, even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

It's an easy verse to memorize. It is a verse to shape your life around. And it's amazing what Jesus reveals here. He says that he is the Son of Man.

And that term means that he is a man like his disciples, but it also means at the same time he is the exalted one who has come from heaven. He has all of God's authority over all things in heaven and in earth.

He has every right to be worshipped and adored. But he says, I came not to be served, but to serve. That's my great purpose.

He is using his infinite power to serve and to love. The blind men at the end of this passage call him Son of David. He is Israel's shepherd who loves his people.

[ 24 : 17 ] He says to those two, what do you want? How can I serve you? And he has pity on those blind men. He loves them. In the midst of his pain and anguish of this purpose, of the great exalted one who dies for the sins of the world, in love, he touches those blind men so that they can see and they follow him.

They follow him. Now, how does Jesus serve? How does he give his life as a ransom for many? Well, that word ransom means a payment given to release somebody from slavery.

Jesus is saying, I am the payment. I am the gift that frees you from slavery to sin and death. Free from being under God's judgment.

And you are freed to the freedom of being God's children. That's our great pattern. Jesus, from the very beginning of time, asked the question, what is your greatest need?

And he asked the second question, how can I meet it? From the beginning of time, his great purpose is to go to Jerusalem to meet that need by reconciling us to God on a cross.

[ 25 : 36 ] So as we go from this passage, Jesus speaks to you and to me this morning to strengthen our service according to his pattern. To ask those serving questions of the people in our lives, what is their greatest need?

How can I meet it? That's Jesus' pattern from the beginning of time. And we answer that last question not in the pride of self-reliance of how I can meet it, but with the power of Jesus.

He has ransomed us and loved us. He has released us to his service that is perfect freedom as we just prayed. He gives us his Holy Spirit to strengthen us and to serve.

Do you know that when James received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when he understood fully the gospel of Jesus, his great purpose was to lead the church in Jerusalem.

And he ended up dying for Jesus, the first disciple to die because of his faith in Jesus Christ. He received the power to serve in costly ways.

[ 26 : 44 ] And John, likewise, was marvelously transformed as well. These Zebedee brothers. By God's power, he became Jesus' faithful witness in service right through his life into his 90s.

He wrote the gospel of John, the letters of John, and Revelation. He said, we love, we serve because Jesus first loved us.

That's our marching orders. So may God, the Holy Spirit, each day grant us Jesus' ambition to serve, as he did for James and John, so that we can look at one another and look at the people in our lives with new eyes.

We see in living colors God's plan for the people that we know. May the eyes of Jesus, who came not to be served, but give his life as a ransom for many, be the way that we see the world. May we give all of ourselves in loving service to Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us. Amen. Amen.