

THE PATHWAY TO GREATNESS

Matthew 20:17-28

We have in our congregation at least two Marines. They have not been active for years, but you know that there is no such thing as a former Marine. It's once a Marine, always a Marine. Now, I don't know what it is about Marines, but many of them – not ours, mind you – but many of them have just a tad bit of arrogance about them. Its like, “You army boys just play soldier. But if you want to really know what being a soldier is all about, then just tag along and watch us for awhile”. And as we all know, the Marines don't think that there are too many others out there that are tough enough to join their outfit. For they say that they are looking for just a few good men.

May I say to you this morning that God is looking for a few men Himself. But He is not looking for a few good men, He is looking for a few **great** men, and great women, and teenagers, and even a few great children. And I say just a few, because God has set the bar high for greatness, and only a few ever reach it. Jesus said in Matt. 7:14 that narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. But I'm not talking about just making it into the Kingdom of God at this point. I'm talking about being great in the Kingdom of God. And if there are only a few true followers of Jesus Christ who enter the Kingdom, I can assure you that those who are great in His Kingdom are even fewer.

Would you desire to be great in the Kingdom of God? Beloved, if you are willing to give God all the glory that is a noble ambition!! Jabez prayed, “Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory...” (2 Chron. 4:10). Pastor John Piper says that his prayer is, “Lord let me make a difference for You that is utterly disproportionate to who I am”. And what these men are is simply, “Lord, let me be great!” Well, what does it take to be great in God's Kingdom? It takes a willingness to be what all of these fireman are in this earthly kingdom in which we all live. Every one of them is a servant. They serve you and me whenever they are called upon. If you have a fire they will be there. If you have a wreck on the road they will be there. If you have a medical emergency they will be there. And if your cat gets stuck up in a tree Jim Tyner and Jerry Sanford will be there. Because your fire fighters are servants. And if you would be great in the Kingdom of God, you must also be a servant.

But greatness in God's Kingdom must come not only from **service**, it also come through **suffering**. And these firefighters are also willing to suffer for you when necessary. If you or I were in a burning building and unable to escape, if there was any hope at all of rescue, they would be willing to risk their lives to save us. Because they are servants who are willing to suffer. And if you would be great in the Kingdom

of God, you must know that **greatness comes through service** and **suffering**. So today we are going to study about how to be great in God's Kingdom. And I pray that God will give all of us who truly know Jesus that grace to say today, "Lord, I'm in. Make me what it takes to be great for your glory".

Turn in your Bibles, please, to Matthew 20:20-28. For three and one half years Zebedee's sons, who were James and John, had been following around the greatest servant who ever lived. They saw Jesus heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, give sight to the blind, raise the dead, and feed the hungry. And they saw Him do it with compassion and humility. Often He would heal someone and then slip out of sight and the person would not even know Who it was that healed him until later. Paul writes in Phil. 2: 7 that when Jesus entered this world He took upon Himself the form of a bondservant. And the literal translation of that word "bondservant" is "slave". Jesus was a slave to anyone who would allow Him to serve them. And James and John were eye witnesses of all this.

But they not only saw all that Jesus did, they also heard all that Jesus taught. They also heard Jesus' teaching on suffering. They heard Him say, "If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn. 15:20). They heard Him say, "Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you for my sake" (Matt. 5:11).

But in addition to Jesus' teaching on suffering, they also heard Him teach about humility. They heard Him teach that when they went to a wedding feast to never sit down at the places of honor, but to sit in the lowly places around the table (Luke 14:8-11). They heard Him teach that unless you humbled yourself as a little child you could not even enter the Kingdom of Heaven, nor could you be great in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 18:3-4).

But after all that James and John had seen and heard about servanthood, suffering and humility, they still didn't get it. In our text Jesus had just finished telling His disciples that He was about to be crucified and then resurrected, but it zipped right over their heads. The only thing on their minds was having a place of honor next to Jesus when He set up His Kingdom. Instead of serving in the Kingdom, all they wanted to do was to be served.

Beloved, may I say to you that from the dawn of Creation that is the way it has always been. Men and even angels seeking glory and honor for themselves and shunning the thoughts of suffering or serving others. It all started in the court of Heaven with Lucifer, who was perhaps the highest ranking angel of them all. Ezekiel writes that Lucifer was the seal of perfection, the anointed cherub who covered (28:12, 14), meaning that God gave him a place of special prominence in the closest

proximity to His throne. But Lucifer was still a servant, and he could not stand being a servant, even to the God of the universe. Lucifer declared, “I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (Is. 14:14). In other words, Lucifer said, “Move over God. Your throne is plenty big enough for the two of us”. And we know what happened because of his discontent. He rebelled against God and was cast out of Heaven’s court and became God’s mortal enemy and the mortal enemy of all who follow God. But pride and self seeking all began with Lucifer.

And beloved, it did not take long at all after God created man for the same curse to corrupt and condemn him and the woman. For Lucifer, who is the Devil, came down to the Garden of Eden and made Eve just as discontented in her role as a servant as he was. God created Eve to be a helper to her husband, to be submissive to his Godly leadership. But Eve would have none of that. She wanted to be the leader instead of the follower. And she usurped her husband’s role as the leader in her home, and she sinned and caused him to sin, and we have been paying the awful price of her rebellion ever since.

But Eve is simply the first of many whose pride led to their down fall. Aaron and Miriam didn’t want to be servants of Moses and rebelled against him, and Miriam became a leper as a result. But the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were not so fortunate. They didn’t want to be servants, either, and when they rebelled against Moses’ leadership the earth opened under their feet and swallowed them all up (Numbers 16:32). Baruch, Jeremiah’s servant, evidently had a problem with being a servant. The Lord sent a message to him through Jeremiah saying, “Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not!” (Jer. 45:5). We read in 3 John that a church member named Diotrephes created all kinds of havoc in the church, and he did it because he loved to have preeminence in the church; he had no thoughts of being a servant whatsoever.

And so all the way through Scripture we read of people filled with pride and selfishness. It should be no surprise to us, then, that this “meism” philosophy has filtered all the way down to the 21st century. Some say that we live in an age of **enlightenment**, that we are more advanced in knowledge than at any time in history. This is certainly true, but friends, a more descriptive word of our age is **entitlement**. We think that the world owes us. The world owes us a job, the world owes us health care. The world owes us higher education. At least some even believe that the world owes us a vacation. That’s right. Just about a year ago the commissioner of the European Union declared that travel for leisure was a right, and that the EU would do what it could to make sure that everyone who could not afford to travel for leisure would still be able to do so. No wonder the EU is in a worse economic mess than we are! They’ve lost their work ethic. They’ve lost the idea of servanthood. They avoid suffering at any cost. But friends, we in America are not far behind!

Well, James and John wanted no part of serving or suffering for Jesus. They only wanted to sit on Jesus' right hand and left, bark out commands for the rest of us, be served as Jesus would be served, and be considered the greatest two saints by everyone else in the Kingdom. And in collaboration with their mother they came to Jesus and asked Him if this would be possible. But it was a foolish request. They didn't have a clue as to what they were asking, as so many times we don't. But Jesus patiently responds to their foolish, selfish request and gives them some invaluable lessons on true greatness if they will but listen. First of all, He shoots another question back to them. "Are you able to drink the cup that I'm about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I'm about to be baptized with?" In other words, "Are you able to hold up to the suffering I'm about to go through and still hold on to your faith?" And without a blink they said, "Yes! We are able!"

Beloved, hear the first lesson you must learn if you want to be great in the Kingdom of God. Beware of ever saying, "I am able"! For you are not able. I am not able. None of us are able to do Kingdom work on our own. James and John certainly were not able to drink the bitter cup of suffering that they claimed they could. For in their very first test of this boast they failed miserably, for when Jesus was arrested just a short time later they fled for their lives. Jesus said in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing". But Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 3:6 that God has made us able ministers of the New Testament. And those who are great for God have great fear of their own weakness and great trust in His power.

But in His question to James and John, Jesus shows them that their concern should not be that they **rule** with Him, but that they **suffer** for Him. Jesus told them that He was about to drink the cup of scourging and crucifixion. He was about to be baptized with more sorrow than any human being had ever known, the sorrow of the sins of the whole world. Can you imagine the suffering of the sinless Christ bearing every sin and every iniquity of every man, woman, boy, and girl who has ever lived? Can you imagine the suffering of Jesus' being rejected by His own Father? Our finite minds will never be able to conceive the suffering that Jesus endured on the cross. But think about it. Historians tell us that conservatively speaking there have been 40 billion people who lived on planet earth since it was created. The greatest leader, the greatest influence the world has ever known was also the greatest sufferer.

But if you would be great in God's kingdom, He has called you to suffer, too. Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). "Let him be willing to suffer", Jesus says. But I'm afraid that just like J. & J.; many in the church don't get it. We are the nation of a feel-good religion. It is the mindset of millions who are sitting in the pews of churches all across America this morning. They come to church if they feel good enough to come. They give when they feel like giving. They serve when they feel

like serving. But when they do feel good enough to bless the Lord with their presence on a Sunday morning, they come to church saying, “Feed me, pastor. Tell me stories that will sooth my guilty conscience and boost my self-esteem. Tell me jokes I can delight my coworkers with the next day. And make sure my children have the best and the brightest teachers in the church, and the best play equipment and the best snacks, too.” Pastor John Stott describes these people this way:

“They have allowed themselves to become somewhat involved (in the church); enough to be respectable but not enough to be uncomfortable. Their religion is a great, soft cushion. It protects them from the hard unpleasantness of life, while changing its place and shape to suit their convenience”

Do you know anyone whose religion is just a great, soft cushion? Could that person be you? Friend, the one who would ever be great in God’s kingdom must understand that greatness comes through suffering! Paul said in 2 Tim. 3:12, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”. I admit this verse haunts me at times. It makes me wonder if I am really living a godly life by God’s standards. For the fact is, beloved, when you and I live like Jesus, some in the lost world are going to treat us like they treated Jesus. They will laugh at us, they will stab us in the back, and they might even kill us if given the chance. But if I would be great and you would be great in the Kingdom of God, we will take the chance.

But let’s move on from suffering and take a look at serve for a few moments. Jesus said in v. 26 & 27, “....whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant, and whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave”. Beloved, there is a difference between suffering and serving. You can actually suffer for Jesus and not serve Jesus. You can suffer for your stand for Christ at work, you can suffer for your stand for Christ at school, and you can suffer for Christ when you stand up for Him when His name is cursed at a ball game. But then you can go home after your day of suffering for Jesus and not lift a finger to serve your wife or your children or your ailing neighbor next door. And I will not say that your suffering for Jesus that day was in vain. For if you’ve suffered according to His will and you’ve suffered according to His strength, then He has been glorified. But if all you do is suffer for Jesus, you will never be great. You will not be great until you have served.

Now, I want to give you some handles for just a few minutes on how to become a true servant. How to break out of that “meism” mindset that so pervades our culture. First of all, we must understand that **all God’s children are already servants**. Turn in your Bibles, please, to Romans 6:17-18. Paul tells us something here that many, many people are not aware of about themselves. And that is, all of your life you’ve been somebody’s slave. If you are not saved today, if you are not a

Christian, at this moment you are a slave to sin. You have a sin nature that dominates your life. Proverbs 5:22 says that you are bound by the cords of your sin, and left to yourself you will die in your sin. But if you are saved today, if you are a Christian, the moment you became a Christian Jesus set you free from the bondage of your sin. **But**, at the very same time you became a slave to righteousness. You became a slave to God. Three times we read Paul introducing himself in his letters as a slave of God or Jesus Christ (Romans, Philippians, Titus).

Now, all of us know that a slave has no rights. A slave lives to serve and please his master. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:9, "Therefore we make it our aim.....to be well-pleasing to Him". Our goal as Christians is to please Jesus, to be about His business. Paul also said, whether you eat, drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). In our home, on our job, in the classroom, athletic field, in the restaurant, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, our motive should be to show people what a great and mighty God we love and serve.

Some of you may know or know of Bill McDonald. Bill's job is to serve Nick Saban. Actually, Bill serves the entire U of A football team, but Coach Saban is the one he must please first and foremost. Bill is the guy that goes ahead of the team to every city they play in and makes all their arrangements. Hotel accommodations, travel to and from the stadium, meals – it's all up to Bill. And he has only one concern on his job. Serve and please Nick. Beloved, this should be our only concern for our lives as Christians. To serve and please God; to promote His agenda for this world. And here's the deal. **God's agenda is that we serve people in the name of Jesus and point them to Him as Savior and Lord.** Jesus said in v. 28 that He came to serve the world and save the world. Look at it again.

So beloved, that's the motivation we have for serving others. We are God's slaves, and He has ordered us to serve others in His name. And when you will do this, and when you will even serve to the point of suffering, then Jesus says that you will be great in the Kingdom of God.

Now, I must share one more thing with you before we close. We become great in the Kingdom of God by **serving** and **suffering**, but we must enter the Kingdom by another way. And that is the way of **submission**. We must submit our lives to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.