

Matthew 20:24-28

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The disciples become upset and embittered at James and John for getting their mother to ask Jesus to give them what they wanted for themselves. Jesus takes this occasion to remind all His disciples that greatness in His kingdom is not lording it over others. It is serving them as the Messiah came to serve — even unto death.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 10:41-45.

In the prior passage, James and John, through their mother, asked *Jesus* to grant them positions of *authority*, influence, and prestige in the future administration of His Messianic kingdom. They asked to be *first*, to sit on *His* right and left. But they did not know what they were asking for. They did not know this because they still did not realize that *Jesus* would be killed; and they still did not understand that to be *first* and become *great* in the kingdom was the opposite of what these things mean on earth. *Jesus* told *them* that one day they would understand and that they would suffer as He would suffer, but it was for *His* Father to decide who gets to be where in *His* kingdom's administration.

When the other *ten* disciples found out how *the two brothers* had asked *Jesus* to be *first* in His kingdom, they *became indignant* with James and John. They likely were *indignant with them* because the sons of Zebedee had asked *Jesus* this before they did. And they were envious because they cleverly used their mother to ask for *them*. (Why didn't they think of that!) They were jealous of *the brothers'* ambition.

Jesus never scolded His *disciples* for their ambition. He loved their ambition and He taught *them* all how to fulfill it, by redirecting it to the correct objective, which is to serve others in truth and love.

The *disciples'* desire *to be first* in greatness comes from a natural, God-designed ambition. God created man *to be great*. He privileged man over all His creation by making people in His divine image (Genesis 1:26-27; Psalm 8). And God did so with a special purpose. He did not create man in His image to be mediocre or lame. God created man to have dominion and to rule creation in harmony with Him (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8). And He implanted the ambition to exercise this dominion within the heart of every human. Everyone was created to be a servant king or queen in the likeness of God. And we only find our happiness to the extent that we operate in His divine design and fulfill His divine destiny *to be great*.

It was with sin and the Fall of Man that our ambition for glory and greatness became twisted. When man rebelled against God the divine impulse *to become great* remained, but instead of seeking *to become great* in and through our relationship with God, and in serving others, we began to seek *to be great* on our own terms—independent from Him. But this “greatness” is a sham. It is not true greatness. Its glory is small and ever-fading. Self-seeking greatness is inevitably gained through exploitation of others. This can be seen by reflecting on characters

from history who are called “the great,” such as “Herod the Great” who was a maniacal butcher, and killed his own wives and children. It is a pitiful counterfeit compared to what God designed and desires for us.

Greatness within the imagination of the Fall is relative to our status *among* others. It is largely based on squashing others and keeping our competitors down rather than actually being exalted by God. Among the kingdoms of the earth, one becomes *great* by ruthlessly diminishing others. This was how the world misconceives greatness. It was also how *the disciples* wrongly imagined it. True greatness comes from service and stewardship. It comes from investing in others, and elevating those around us.

Redeeming this petty moment of jealousy and indignation *among His disciples*, *Jesus called them all to Himself* and began to explain to *them* yet again what it means to be and *become great* in His kingdom (Matthew 5:3-12; 5:20; 5:41; 6:3-4; 6:6; 6:20; 6:33; 7:13-14; 7:24-25; 10:32-33; 10:42; 13:44; 13:45-46; 16:24-27; 18:4; 19:21; 19:28-30; 20:16).

Jesus said: You are fully aware that the rulers of Gentiles lord it over everyone with less power and influence than themselves. And their great men exercise authority over them all. The disciples instantly knew this to be true from painful experience. Justice in the Roman world had little to do with what was right or fair. It had everything to do with order and understanding who was in a position of power. For those not in power it was understood that “might makes right.” And to challenge this code would lead to brutal reminders or of being made a terrifying example. To survive, one had to *know* one’s place in society and avoid the wrath of those *over them*.

Roman *rulers*, all the way from Imperial Caesar, to provincial governors such as Pilate, to its treacherous tax collectors as Matthew used to be, took full advantage of their position *over* others to extract what they wanted. It was a system based on power, corruption, and abuse. That was what *Jesus* meant by *lord it over them*. To be *great* among *the Gentiles* was to be above the law and be able to coerce anyone they were *over* to do their bidding. Everyone served the *rulers*. *The rulers* served no one.

Jesus said, “Don’t be like *the Gentile rulers—it is not to be this way among you* who are My *disciples*. He could have added “Don’t be like the Sadducees and Pharisees” because in their own way they followed the same pattern as Rome of lording *it over* others. The religious and the political authorities of *Jesus’s* day both held to the same false vision and corrupt values for what it meant *to become great*. *Jesus* gave a similar rebuke during the Sermon on the Mount as He commanded *His* followers to love even their enemies (Matthew 5:47).

Jesus had a true and better way for people to be *great*. And He gave two simple instructions for *whoever wishes to become great*. This phrase demonstrates that greatness is attainable by any and everyone. *Whoever wishes to become great* could be *great* by following *Jesus’s* two instructions.

The two instructions were *whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant*; and *whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave*.

To be great in God's kingdom is to serve people and put their needs *first*. Servants and slaves are the last to have their needs met. It was a *servant* and *slave's* job to meet the needs of their *rulers first*. Only after all the needs of their *rulers* were met, could they then focus on meeting their own needs. *Jesus* was teaching His *disciples* to adopt the mentality and outlook of a slave in their interactions with everyone, not just those in *authority over them*. And He *said* that if they acted in *this way* then they would *become great in His kingdom*.

This is a practical application and true meaning of "the last *shall be first*" proverb (Matthew 19:30; 20:16). *To be great* in the kingdom means to be considered least on earth. *To be first* in heaven means to be last *among* men. This was precisely what *Jesus* did when He left heaven for earth (Philippians 2:5-7). But James and John and *the disciples* were not thinking of spiritual truth, they were arguing about (their views of) kingdom politics. And so, *Jesus* presented *Himself* as a vastly different kind of political example for *His disciples* to emulate.

As the Messiah, *the Son of Man* did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. As God's anointed King and ruler of men, Christ did not lord it over those He ruled. He did not demand that His needs be met *first* according to His royal right. Instead, as a Good Shepherd, He came to put the needs of those He led *first*, before His own (John 10:11). The King put His own needs last. And when His kingdom was in danger, the King would surrender His own life for the security of His kingdom.

The Messiah and His kingdom are not like the rulers of the Gentiles or their kingdoms. The Messiah came to serve *first*, and to teach His disciples how to serve *first*. Kingdom leadership is serving. And only those who serve *first* can become great rulers in the kingdom.

And *Jesus* explained to His disciples that what was true of Himself as a Servant King was also to be true among you if you wish to become great in His kingdom. You must learn to lead by serving (Mark 10:44). And especially serving the least of these: the children (Matthew 18:4-5, 10) the poor, the refugee, the sick, the imprisoned (Matthew 25:34-40).

The Son of Man came to give His life ("pusche") as a ransom for many. In obedience to His Father's will, the Messiah came to redeem the world (John 3:16). He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11). He came to pay the penalty of man's sin, through His death on a cross, so that mankind could be saved and restored to our divine and glorious destiny. *Jesus* came to show us how to be great forever.

God created and ransomed us to become great. We become great by following *Jesus* and His definition of serving people. We are to love and serve one another as *Jesus* loved and served us (John 15:12). We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 7:12; Matthew 22:39). We are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). We are to deny our lives ("pusche") and take up our crosses and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). We are to lay down our lives ("pusche") for our friends (John 15:13).

And if we do these things in this life by faith and for His sake we will be great in His kingdom (Matthew 25:20; 2 Timothy 2:12).

In the epistle of 1 Peter, Peter instructed leaders in the church not to lord their authority over believers, but to serve.

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.”

(1 Peter 5:1-3)

From this we can see that Peter did come to understand this message. So much so that he practiced it, and taught it. The next verse in 1 Peter 5 speaks of leaders who are faithful in being servants gaining *great* rewards from God in heaven. We should all be encouraged that God did such amazing thing through such thick-headed men, with whom He worked patiently, and lovingly, molding them like potters clay.

Biblical Text

²⁴ And hearing *this*, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”