

# Matthew 23:11-12

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*Jesus teaches that the remedies for Bad Religion is humility before God and others, as well as contentment in serving regardless of earthly recognition. These are the practices that will make one great in His kingdom.*

The parallel accounts of this teaching are found in Matthew 20:26 and Luke 14:11.

After instructing His disciples to avoid the Bad Religion of the scribes and Pharisees and to not strive to rival or to follow a human rival to God as the One Rabbi, Leader, and Father (Matthew 23:8-10), Jesus reminded His disciples and taught the crowds (Matthew 23:1) how to become truly great. The greatness Jesus spoke of was a lasting greatness in His kingdom, rather than the illusory and temporal greatness granted by the world.

He told them two things:

1. *The greatest among you shall be your servant.*
2. *Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

In saying these things, Jesus did not want His disciples to misunderstand what He had just told them. He did not want them to mistake His comments about not seeking to be called Rabbi, Leader, or calling anyone else Father to mean that He did not wish them to become the great. Jesus expected and desired for His disciples to strive for true greatness, which is eternal greatness in His kingdom. This was why He quickly reminded them that the way to be *the greatest* is by being a humble *servant* right after telling them not to rival God.

In this section we will consider each of Jesus's two statements: 1) *The greatest among you shall be your servant* and 2) *Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

## ***The greatest among you shall be your servant***

In the Bible's many recorded conversations that Jesus had with His disciples about greatness (Matthew 18:1-4; 20:25-28; Mark 9:33-36; Luke 22:24-30), Jesus never discouraged their ambition to become great. Rather, He consistently encouraged them to be great. He did, on practically all of these occasions however, redirect their desire to be *the greatest* away from the world's fallen perception and toward the good and beautiful truth about the reality that true greatness comes through serving.

Man's ambition and drive for greatness is innate. It was imparted to us by God when He made us in His own image. Indeed, His divine mandate calls for man to have great "dominion" over the earth as we steward His creation (Genesis 1:28). Everyone wants their life to matter, which is a

form of desiring greatness. This ambition for greatness is, when untwisted, a godly desire to become what God created us to be.

But the Fall (Genesis 3) perverted this godly desire. It distorted man's ambition away from God's original intent and mis-defined greatness to mean having as many people as possible serve "me" and "my desires." The world's idea of what it means to be *greatest* is often applied to those who exhibit *the greatest* ability to exploit others and bend them to their will. Many men dubbed "the Great" by historians were great butchers, and oppressors. The worldly images of greatness held by the disciples were likely kings and priests who demanded honor, glory, and often tribute from their people—men like the Pharisees who Jesus was instructing them to not emulate (Matthew 23:2-3).

Jesus did not want His disciples to fail or be mediocre. He wanted His disciples to be *the greatest*, but He desired them to be *greatest* within His kingdom—not the world's. Jesus desired their greatness to be real, true, and lasting. Throughout their time with Jesus, the disciples' ambition or drive for greatness was healthy, but their aim was often wrong. Their worldly image of greatness was the opposite of how God designed it.

In both the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God, greatness includes having responsibility and authority. It includes social and political power to accomplish. However, the purpose and means are contrasting opposites. In the world system, greatness is sought by elevating self over others, with the ultimate outcome of being brought low. In God's kingdom, greatness is sought by elevating others over self, with the ultimate outcome being exalted by God (1 Peter 5:6).

Jesus seemed to take every opportunity throughout His ministry to realign His disciples' picture and paradigm of greatness to the truth of God's good design for it. On His last night with the disciples, Jesus will wash their feet as an overt illustration of this concept (John 13:12-17).

To see how greatness is social and political power and glory, consider what the Bible says about how Jesus rewards believers who are faithful:

"Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."  
(Matthew 13:43a)

"And Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'"  
(Matthew 19:28)

"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'"  
(Matthew 25:23)

"Or do you not know that **the saints will judge the world**? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that **we will judge**

**angels?** How much more matters of this life?”  
(1 Corinthians 6:2-3)

“If we endure, we will also reign with Him...”  
(2 Timothy 2:12a)

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”  
(Revelation 3:21)

Even though greatness includes glory and power in both the world system and Christ’s kingdom, how greatness is acquired and how it is utilized are completely different from each other.

Within the world system, greatness is defined as having power over others. It is often established through coercion, manipulation, and abuse—especially of the weak or those who are unable to defend themselves. Worldly greatness is compelling others to do for you what you want them to do. The greater a person is according to the world system the more other people serve and exalt them.

The Pharisees that Jesus described in this chapter (Matthew 23:2-7; 23:13-36) sought a form of worldly greatness that was ruthless toward others. These Pharisees *exalted themselves*. But God’s kingdom is unlike the systems of this world.

Within God’s kingdom, greatness is established through humility (Matthew 18:3; Luke 14:11), service (Matthew 20:26; Mark 9:35; Luke 22:26), and love for everyone—especially those who are overlooked or who are unable to offer anything in return in this life (Matthew 18:4; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48; Luke 14:13-14). Greatness in God’s kingdom is granted by God (Romans 2:6-7). God tells us that he will grant honor to those who serve others who cannot serve themselves. The greater a person is in the kingdom the more people he serves (Matthew 5:3; 5:5; 5:10; 19:20-21).

Greatness in the world is causing others to be “for” you in some way. Greatness according to God is living for the good of others, regardless of the cost. Jesus was rejected by the world for telling the truth, and gave His life as a ransom for the world (Matthew 20:28; John 3:19). In this manner, Jesus set the example for us to follow. God’s desire is that we follow Jesus’s example, and in doing so share His reward and be restored to God’s original design for humans to rule and reign over the earth (Hebrews 2:5-10). Jesus was the ultimate servant, and as a result God gave Him authority over all things (Matthew 28:18).

***Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.***

Jesus explained the paths to shame and greatness with parallel proverbs. Each path is counterintuitive.

The path to becoming *humbled* with shame is through self-exaltation. This is what Jesus meant by *whoever exalts himself shall be humbled*. If we promote our own greatness by way of worldly boasts, we will end up ashamed when Christ appears and inaugurates His kingdom.

The path to becoming *exalted* with glory and greatness is through self-humility. This is what Jesus meant by *whoever humbles himself shall be exalted*. If we humble ourselves in the eyes of the world by trusting Jesus and following His example of serving others—especially those who cannot repay us (Luke 14:12-14)—then we *shall be exalted* by Christ Himself in the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 3:21).

These counter-intuitive paths are very similar to Jesus's oft repeated paradoxical teaching "For whoever wishes to save his life ["psuche"] will lose it; but whoever loses his life ["psuche"] for My sake will save it" (Matthew 16:25). (See also Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; and John 12:25).

Jesus also taught this proverb—*Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted*—in another setting. He once shared it at a dinner party where He was invited by a Pharisee (Luke 14:7-11) and elaborated upon the practical advice that Solomon taught in Proverbs 25:6-7.

In the current passage, Jesus's two statements about greatness were:

- *The greatest among you shall be your servant;*
- *Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

Both of these teachings aligned with the example of our great Messiah.

1. Jesus was *the greatest*. And He came as a *servant*.

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."  
(Matthew 20:28)

2. Jesus did not come as one who *exalts*

"Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped."  
(Philippians 2:5b-6)

3. Jesus came as one who *humbles himself*.

"but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."  
(Philippians 2:7-8)

4. Because Jesus did these things He was *exalted* by His Father, and given authority over all things.

“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:9-11)

Jesus taught His disciples how to become *the greatest among you* through His words and actions. He lived this with His actions. May we too follow His great example. Instead of lording our position of authority over other people, as the world promotes, may we live true greatness by serving them. May we do the work to lift others up, helping them be successful. May we do “our best” to play “our role” to help “the team” succeed.

This requires living a life of faith, believing God’s promise that we will gain great benefit from humbling ourselves, serving in ways that bring us no earthly reward, and living this way even when it brings us grief from the world. It takes faith to believe that God’s rewards will exceed the rewards promised by the world:

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

(Hebrews 11:6).

We should seek to be like Jesus, who is “the author and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus, “endured the cross, despising the shame” of the world (Hebrews 12:2). This means that although Jesus endured massive shame, being hung on a cross before the world, He gave it no notice. To “despise” something is to assign it no value. The reason Jesus assigned no value to shame from the world was because of the contrast between what the world had to offer and the “joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2). That “joy” was received when Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” To sit at the “right hand” is to be given all authority, second only to the Father Himself.

Humility before God and others and contentment in serving regardless of earthly recognition are Jesus’s remedy for Bad Religion. They are the disposition and the practice of Good Religion. And they are the qualities that mark greatness in His kingdom.

“Humility” is seeing things as they actually are. As humans, we are limited beings. So in order to see actual reality we must rely on God’s revealed truth. Thus, faith and humility are essential companions (Hebrews 11:6).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>11</sup> But the greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.**