

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we look at a topic that I believe is of great interest to everyone here today. The topic is: “True Greatness.” We seem to have something built in to us that strives for greatness.

Children want to be great. Ask a children what they want to be when they grow up, and you hear answers like, “Astronaut. Fire fighter. Policeman. Doctor. There’s something in us that wants to do great things. They have a concept of what it would look like to be great, and that’s what they strive for. It’s only when we get to be adults that we sometimes give up the dream and settle for doing what pays the bills.

But even so, we know we are “settling.” Who strives for mediocrity? Nobody says, “My goal in life is to be average. I hope that when I die, people will say, ‘Yeah, he was pretty much like everyone else. Just an average Joe.’”

- My goal in my profession is rise to the level of mediocrity. Not the worst and not the best.
- When I golf, I strive to finish somewhere in the middle, and I’m happy when I score about what I usually score.
- In my marriage, we’re not looking for a great relationship, just an average one.
- I’m saving up for a new car, but I don’t want to buy the best one, just an adequate car.”

We don’t want average. We want greatness.

This desire for greatness is not wrong in and of itself. However, this is critical: our quest for greatness will be our downfall if our definition of greatness and path to greatness are wrong.

So let’s learn from God’s Word today as we turn to Matthew 20:17-28. Listen as I read:
17 Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 18 “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death 19 and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” “ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Let's take a closer look now. Jesus has his sights set toward Jerusalem. In Matthew's Gospel, the very next chapter is Palm Sunday as Jesus enters into Jerusalem. By the end of that week, he would be hanging on the cross, dying for the sins of the world.

And so Jesus has been preparing his disciples for what is to come. He has been foretelling exactly what would happen: he would be betrayed. They would condemn him to death. He will be mocked, flogged and crucified. And on the third day he will rise to life.

You would think that this prophecy would have completely absorbed the thoughts of the disciples. You would think that this would consume them. So what comes next is completely unexpected... at least to me. I'm not sure I can explain this. What was going through the minds of James and John, and their mother? What were they thinking in that right after this, the mother of James and John could come up to Jesus, bow before him and ask what she asked? **"What is it you want?"** Jesus asked. She said, **"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."**

Now we shouldn't think that she was doing this purely on her own. This request came just as much from James and John as it did from their mother. The three of them are in this together. Yet they strategically ask Mom to approach Jesus. Who can deny the request of a begging mother?

So here already we see their mistaken notion about greatness. They thought that greatness meant being in the visible, prominent place next to Jesus. They wanted the most power. They wanted to ruling with Jesus. They wanted authority with Jesus. Their misunderstanding about true greatness led them to ask for something foolish.

But we can hardly fault them. The way we understand greatness today is really no different.

Society that's all about personal greatness. Pride. We are self-centered. Egotistical. We focus on self-esteem. Self-glorifying. Self-aggrandizement. Self-promotion. Self-motivation. Personal ambition.

The way most see the purpose of marriage today reflects this cult of self that most are members of today. Marriage is not seen as something primarily for the good of the other, or for the good of society. Marriage is instead seen as a means for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. People look for a marriage partner that will help them reach their personal goals.

Sadly, this view of greatness has even made it into many churches. People twist what the Bible says to encourage pride, self-esteem, self-glory, self-promotion, self-image building. Rather than people gathered to give all glory to Jesus, some churches have become shrines to self where you can improve yourself, feel good about yourself, and help shape your thoughts and environment and relationships for the benefit of self. They teach that God's only design for you is to make you happy, healthy, wealthy and fulfilled. They teach God wants to make you great in this world.

This seems to be the concept of greatness that James, John and their mom had. Don't we fall into the same desire for personal greatness in this world? Don't we tend to think of greatness in terms of this world and what it offers?

Jesus corrected those three... and us:

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. Jesus had just foretold that his path to greatness included incredible suffering and a horrific death. So he asks: **"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"** Can you suffer for the sins of the world in a way no one has ever suffered before and never will again? **"We can," they answered.** They so didn't get it! But listen how patient Jesus is: **Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, In**

other words, as followers of Jesus they will indeed drink of the cup of suffering. Not the whole cup as he did, but certainly of that cup. Followers of Jesus must suffer. Jesus is already beginning to show them that the path of greatness is not through earthly power, authority, wealth, or health. The path of greatness for the Christian is a path of suffering. Jesus goes on: **“but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”**

So Jesus begins to correct their faulty notion of greatness. Let’s just look at a quick sampling of the Bible’s warnings about pride and a striving after worldly greatness:

The Bible speaks about pride very clearly.

- "A proud heart is sin," it says in Proverbs 21:4.
- Proverbs 16:5 “The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.”
- In 1 Timothy 3:6, it says that a person who is arrogant falls under the same judgement as the devil.
- 1 John 2:16 “For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.”

So, pride is sin. It certainly shouldn't be a part of Christians' experience to pursue self-glory and pride.

Before we can even talk about true greatness, we must confess to God that we have a heart that’s bent on false greatness. We strive after that which is actually sinful and offensive to God. We desire to rob glory from God and claim it for ourselves, and we think in so doing we are great.

Confess your sinful pride, your selfishness, your self-glorification. Confess it to God, knowing how horrible it is, and how angry it makes God. Confess your sin, recognizing it for the complete ugliness that it is.

Then look to your Savior Jesus for full and free forgiveness. Jesus, before he ever went to Jerusalem, knew these details: **“The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death 19 and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.”**

Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He knew what humiliation was about to come. He knew the horrible shame. He knew the unfathomable pain and suffering. He knew it all. We might ask, “This is greatness?!” It sure doesn’t look that way, does it? But this was what it would take to rescue us. The heavenly Father’s perfect justice must be satisfied. Sin must be atoned for! There must be punishment! The wages of sin is death! Yet the Father loves you and I, and doesn’t want us to perish. Could there be another way? Yes. The rescue we need comes through Jesus. We could not avoid sin or its consequences. We were powerless to change our path to eternal destruction.

But Jesus was not powerless. The all-powerful Son of God humbled himself, became a servant, took on human flesh and blood, and set aside his power and glory to rescue us. He came to serve us and to give his life as ransom. In true greatness, Jesus silently endured the abuse, mockery, scourging, crown of thorns, and finally the agony of the cross, nails through hands and feet. He quietly endured the most torturous death the Romans could think up. He endured the separation of fellowship from his Father. He hung in darkness on the cross. And he died. He died for you, to give you life, and to set you free.

“This is amazing grace! This is unfailing love. That you would take my place. That you would bear my cross. You lay down your life. That I would be set free. Oh, Jesus, I sing for all that you’ve done for me.”

Now, that path of suffering and self sacrifice was true greatness for Jesus. It was confirmed through his glorious resurrection on the third day. What does it look like for us, his redeemed, loved, free followers to be truly great? Let’s look back at the text:

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. You know what “greatness” looks like in the world. Not so with you. You will be different! You will be great in a different way. And what does it look like? Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus’ greatness was in his humble service. He gave his life as the necessary ransom price to set us free. And we are free indeed. So as we follow Jesus what will greatness look like for us? It will look like humble service. Putting the needs of others ahead of your own. It will mean a total transformation of our hearts. Not: “What’s in it for me?” But “How can I help *you*.”

The way the world looks at greatness is like a pyramid with me on top. If I can just reach the top I will have people under me. I will be over them. I will stand on their backs and they will support me! They will submit to me, and serve me. They will have to do whatever I say! I will be great!

Jesus says, “No, that’s the way the godless people do greatness. Not so with you.” It’s exactly opposite. Jesus says that we must take that pyramid and invert it. Jesus says that the person who is great will serve others. The person who is greatest will have the strength, leverage, influence and power to serve lots and lots of people. He will be under them, not over them. He will help them, not exploit them.

True greatness in the kingdom of God means that in loving submission to Jesus, and having full trust in his free forgiveness, you now love and serve others.

Strive for greatness. Strive to have greater influence and leverage... even wealth... in this world. But not for self glory. Rather for God’s glory. That you might have the resources and influence to do even greater things for Jesus, greater things for God’s kingdom, greater acts of service to help those who do not have as much as you. THAT is greatness in the kingdom of God.

This isn’t easy. What I’ve just explained is so countercultural. It is so much in opposition to what our heart tells us, and to what we see all around us. But it’s what Jesus says.

Friends, be truly great! Go and serve the Lord Jesus by serving one another. Do so only for his glory’s sake! Amen.