

Matthew 20:20-28; Phil. 2:1-11; Seeking to Be the Greatest I. The Simple Request for Greatness II. The Shocking Command for Humility

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the greatest of all time? The acronym of GOAT- greatest of all time- has been applied to many different people. Michael Jordan- or Messi on the soccer pitch- and Tom Brady on the football field- have all enjoyed the status of being the greatest of all time. But being the greatest in the world is not attained by being the best at some sport! The way in which our world measures greatness is by being the best- the most accomplished- the most visible and popular which also leads to an awful lot of boasting and pride. But being the first in line is not the way that God measures greatness! So today we are going to consider one of the brother pairs within the disciples- specifically James and John known as the sons of thunder. As we do we consider this theme: Jesus Christ calls his followers to a life of humility if they would be great in God's sight.

I. The Simple Request for Greatness

In our first point we consider this request made for greatness. Our passage opens in v. 20 with the mother of James and John coming up to Jesus with a simply request. Make these two sons of mine to be the greatest in your kingdom- one to sit at your right hand and one to sit on your left. Now this is presented as a mother's request and it was done with humility. Now we know that James and John's father was named Zebedee- and their mother's name was Salome. So it was Salome who comes and kneels before Jesus- as a sign of great reverence and honor. We also see that in the context- if you look back at 19:28- Jesus has just promised that these 12 disciples will sit on 12 thrones to judge the 12 tribes. So it was likely that Salome has just heard that her sons will sit on 12 thrones- and she wants to ask for a place of honor to be given to her sons. Now Salome was one of the few faithful followers of Jesus. She was with Jesus from the beginning and she would remain all the way to end. If you would look at Mark 16 and John 19:25, you will find Salome with Mary at the foot of the cross and preparing to anoint the body of Jesus after his death. So Salome was a constant presence with Mary in the life of

Jesus. And when you take these two passages together- Mark 16 and John 19- you will find that Salome is actually Mary's sister. So that would make James and John the first cousin of Jesus as well- which is an interesting bit of information. So Salome was Jesus' aunt (Mary's sister)-and here she is asking for a privileged place to be given to her sons which were Jesus' cousins as well. But Salome is not acting alone, no as we find in v. 22- her sons were behind her. So James and John have encouraged their mother to make this request- and Jesus will answer them as a group. Mark 10 actually credits James and John with this request. The request is simply this- when you come into your kingdom, let us sit at your right and left side. Give us positions of honor in the kingdom even above these other disciples. Now there is faith in this statement- these brothers did believe that Jesus was the King and that His kingdom was coming. So far so good- but their desire to be great and their path to greatness was wrong. They were expecting an earthly kingdom- and they wanted earthly power and prestige! And this fits with what we know about these brothers. They were called the sons of thunder by Jesus- they were very outspoken and bold. Even aggressive to the point of wanting to destroy anyone who stood in their way. We find this playing out in Luke 9:54- that is where the Samaritans rejected Jesus as they did not receive him because he was going to Jerusalem. In response to this rejection, James and John offer to call down fire on them for their rejection. So they have the spirit of Elijah in them as well! They were fishermen by trade- following in the footsteps of their father Zebedee.

Now this request from Salome- and the pursuit of James and John for honor and recognition- are met with anger. After the 10 heard this request, they were indignant in v. 24. Being indignant means that they were greatly displeased. They were moved with anger and displeasure. In other words, they did not like the request at all. But it makes you wonder- why were they so angry? Well, it is because they had the same desire in their own hearts! Someone beat them to the punch in making this request. They all wanted the same thing- and these two brothers received the displeasure of the other 10 because they all struggled with selfish ambition. Although this request comes from one woman, it was really the

desire of her two sons- which in fact was the desire of all 12 disciples! Even now, they were thinking in earthly terms. Wanting and waiting for an earthly kingdom. Will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel? This is because the same desire lives in us all. We are all born with a desire for recognition, honor and glory. We all want to establish our own kingdom- to rule over our own little domain- to be recognized by others. The same sinful pride lives in all our hearts. What do I get out of this? What's in it for me? But that is not the way of Christ- nor is that to be the way of His followers.

II. The Shocking Command for Humility

So Jesus responds to His disciples' desire for power and request for greatness with a surprising command for humility. And as we will see, this command is shocking because it goes against everything we are taught. This is another example of a great reversal in Scripture. So Jesus says in v. 26- if you would be great you must be a servant. And again in v. 27- if you would be first in my kingdom, you must be a slave. If you would receive, you must give! This is so foreign to our fallen ears. The first shall be last. To be great you must be small. To save your life you must lose it. To receive honor you must give it to others. To keep your life you have to lay it down. To be blessed you must give yourself away. This is like saying the way up is down. This is just not the way we think! But in the Kingdom of God, the cross comes before the crown. Death comes before life! Jesus explains a similar concept in the parable of the wedding seats in Luke 14. In this parable there is a guest at the wedding that selects the best seat in the house for himself only to be asked to sit further down. Another guest voluntarily chooses the lowest seat for himself and is then elevated as he is invited to come up to the head table. The point Jesus is making is this, "everyone that exalts himself shall be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted." Again, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. If you want to be great in the kingdom of God, you must serve others! Sacrificing yourself for the benefit of those around you. Jesus then gives a negative example in v. 25- don't be like the rulers of this world. These rulers who only see people as puppets to be manipulated. Who use their power to take advantage of others. Who make

rules that apply to others and not themselves. Those who flaunt their own position- who like the position of praise- who crave to be acknowledged by men. Look at me, trust me. Those who use their position to enrich themselves and their own agenda. These kinds of rulers lord it over their subordinates. They are lofty in their own eyes. Do not be like the rulers of the Gentiles- don't emulate the political power brokers of the day. Christian service is the exact opposite to what you see on the campaign trail or political ads on TV. Although many politicians have promised to work for you when on the election trail, once in office they work only for themselves. But what the disciples forgot- and what we must always remember is this- the life of a Christian is one in which we are called to put the needs of others before ourselves. As we read in Phil. 2, in humility count others more significant than yourselves. This applies to us all- and particularly to our church leaders! Anyone who is in a leadership position- in the home and in the church- is called to put the needs of others first. True greatness in the eyes of Jesus is found in sacrificial service. Those who lead are in fact the chief servants! This is the path to true greatness! Yet, Christ does not call us to walk a path that He Himself has not first walked. As we also read in Phil. 2, have this mind in you, which is your mind in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant. It is this Jesus who humbled Himself and was obedient even to the point of death. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him- giving Him the name above every name! As you can see, Jesus gave up His position of privilege in heaven in order to become a servant- to take on the form of a slave- in order to serve and save us! Or as Mark 10:45 repeats, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many- in order to rescue us from our sins! Jesus not only saves us by becoming our servant, He also sets the example of service for us to follow. Boasting pride and selfish ambition are repugnant to Christ. As I said before, this is completely foreign to our fallen nature. We want to be first in line- we want the praise- we are selfish- we want others to see and serve us! It is only those who are born again and Spirit filled that will have both the desire and the ability to serve others

like this! And the wonder of it all is this- in their serving they become great! They will receive an eternal reward- the Father who sees your service here below will reward you in the here after! This is the socking command for humility- serve others if you want to be great. As you might know, the apostle James would later learn the cost of following Jesus. He would be martyred by Herod. And John, well he would go on to be exiled as the Lord used him to write 5 NT books with the theme of love and service running through them. So both James and John would drink from the cup of suffering. Both would learn humility as they submitting to Christ and served His people till the end.

As we close, the Christian life is one that calls us to constantly die to the self. To be put to death in order to better serve those around us. We are to give up our own personal pursuits and desires- to be last- to be little in our own eyes. In God's sight, this is true greatness! You will remember that Satan's fall in the beginning started with pride- he was not content with his place but wanted to be greater! So those who follow after Christ know of the tempting lure of power. So we seek to be servants in our lives- putting the needs of others first. Refusing to honor or exalt ourselves- never asking for power and praise as these brothers did. Jesus Christ calls his followers to a life of humility if they would be great in God's sight. Being the greatest of all time is not something that we should pursue- unless we acknowledge that being great in God's sight means service of others! So may we all seek to do good to all- serving within the household of faith- knowing that the first shall be last and the last, first.