

# Studies in the Gospel of Matthew #56

## How to Be Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

Matt 20:20-28

### Introduction:

1. We live in a proud and egotistical generation.
  - a. People push and promote themselves in ways that would have been abhorrent and totally unacceptable only a generation ago.
  - b. Yet in a great part of modern culture, pride and high self-esteem have come to be redefined as virtues
2. Our day is reminiscent of the time in history when at the height of the ancient Greek /Roman empires pride was exalted and humility belittled.
  - a. This tragic development will surely contribute to the demise of modern society as it did to the demise of Greece and Rome.
  - b. When a significant number of people become committed only to themselves and to their own interests, with little regard for their families, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens, society disintegrates.
3. The promotion of self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-glory has become a major industry that ranges from exercise programs to motivation for executive success.
4. Tragically the cult of selfism has found its way into Christianity.
  - a. Books, seminars, conferences, magazines, and organizations that promote self under the guise of personal spiritual dev abound.
  - b. Claims are heard that God's great design for His people is health, prosperity success, happiness, and self-fulfillment.
5. The Bible's teaching of suffering and cross-bearing for Christ's sake are either ignored altogether or foolishly explained away.
6. Times of spiritual awakening are inevitably characterized by a sincere sense of brokenness, contrition, and unworthiness.
7. The Bible's testimony is clear and consistent.
  - a. It was out of pride that Adam and Eve doubted God, believed Satan, and relied on their own judgment
  - b. And since that time pride has continued to be the chief characteristic of fallen, sinful mankind.
8. The book of Proverbs warns us of the danger of pride →
9. While they were with Jesus during His earthly ministry the twelve disciples desperately needed to learn humility.
  - a. It was not so much limited intelligence but excessive pride that prevented them from understanding and accepting Jesus' teaching about such things as servanthood, self-sacrifice, humility persecution, and His clear and repeated predictions about His own forthcoming sufferings and death.
  - b. They were too encumbered with self-promotion, self-service, self-esteem, and self-glory for those truths to penetrate their minds /hearts
10. The disciples had, indeed, left everything to follow Jesus.
  - a. They had genuinely confessed Him as the Messiah. Lord and Savior.
  - b. But, like many Christians in every age since that time, they often focused on what they would gain, revealing that they had not completely let go of pride, selfishness, and worldly standards.
11. While Jesus ministered on earth, the 12 were far from such self-giving, self-effacing discipleship.
  - a. Consequently, Jesus' third and most detailed prediction of His passion and death fell on deaf ears.
  - b. No sooner had He again finished mentioning His death / resurrection than two of the disciples tried to secure from Him a place of honor and greatness for themselves in the anticipated kingdom.
12. In that event and in Jesus' response to it we can see four wrong, worldly ways by which men pursue greatness.
13. Following that, the Lord gave an exhortation and example of what constitutes the true greatness that God honors.

Pr 21:4 An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.

Pr 16:5 Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

Pr 8:13 The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

## I. How Not to Be Great – vs 20-25

- The world's methods of achieving greatness are not to be used in God's kingdom - They are contrary to His way and destructive of His work.

### A. Political Power Play – vs 20-21

1. The political power play and is seen in the attempt of **the mother of the sons of Zebedee** to persuade Jesus to give James and John, the highest places of honor in His kingdom.
  - a) *One of the most common tactics for getting ahead has been using the influence of family and friends to one's own advantage.*
  - b) *These people are manipulated to gain political office, a promotion in business, a lucrative contract, or whatever else is craved.*
  - c) *A pastor frankly admitted that for his denomination's annual convention he always reserved a hotel room next to the leaders in order to cultivate their friendships and thereby help secure future pastorates in larger churches.*
2. It seems incredible that James, John, and their **mother** could ask Jesus such a self-serving favor immediately after His prediction of the persecution and death He would soon face in Jerusalem.
3. There is no indication that any of the disciples made a response to what Jesus had just said about His own imminent death.
4. The three of them may have been trying to capitalize on their family relationship to Jesus.
  - a) *By comparing the gospel accounts of the women who stood vigil near the cross, it becomes evident that the mother of James and John was named Salome and was a sister of Mary the Mother of Jesus*
  - b) *That means she was Jesus' aunt and James and John His first cousins.*
5. **Bowing down** was a common act of obeisance given to ancient monarchs, and the mother may have been trying to flatter Jesus by appealing to His sense of power and royalty.
  - a) *By treating **Him** like a king, she hoped to manipulate Him into making a gesture of magnanimity.*
  - b) *Near Eastern kings liked to pride themselves in having the resources to grant any favor or request.*
  - c) *It was such pride that induced Herod Antipas to swear to the daughter of Herodias, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom" ([Mark 6:23](#)).*
6. Like the scribes and Pharisees who loved "the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues" ([Matt. 23:6](#)), James and John longed for prestige and preeminence and to be exalted over the other apostles.
7. They longed to be first. But that is not the way to greatness in the kingdom of God.

### B. Self-Serving Ambition – vs 22-24

1. Here is a second wrong way to spiritual greatness, that of self-serving ambition.
  - a) *The request of James, John, and their mother not only was brash but foolish.*
  - b) *Bypassing the mother, Jesus **answered** the two brothers directly and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" The three had no idea of the full implications of their request.*
2. **The cup that Jesus was about to drink** was the cup of suffering and death, which He had just finished describing to them ([vv. 18-19](#)).
  - a) *Jesus was saying, "Don't you realize by now that the way to eternal glory is not through worldly success and honor but through suffering?"*
  - b) *Haven't you heard what I've been teaching about the persecuted being blessed and about taking up your own crosses and following Me?"*

20 Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.

20 Τότε προσήλθεν αὐτῷ ἡ μήτηρ τῶν υἱῶν Ζεβεδαίου μετὰ τῶν υἱῶν αὐτῆς, προσκυνούσα καὶ αἰτοῦσα τι παρ' αὐτοῦ.

21 Ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῇ, Τί θέλεις; Λέγει αὐτῷ, Εἰπέ ἵνα καθίσωσιν οὗτοι οἱ δύο υἱοί μου, εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν σου, καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἐναντύμων σου, ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου.

22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. 23 And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. 24 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.

22 Αποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Οὐκ οἶδατε τί αἰτεῖσθε. Δύνασθε πιεῖν τὸ ποτήριον ὃ ἐγὼ μέλλω πίνειν, ἢ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι βαπτισθῆναι; Λέγουσιν αὐτῷ, Δυνάμεθα.

23 Καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Τὸ μὲν ποτήριόν μου πίεσθε, καὶ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι βαπτισθήσεσθε. Τὸ δὲ καθίσει ἐκ δεξιῶν μου καὶ ἐξ ἐναντύμων μου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμὸν δοῦναι, ἀλλ' οἷς ἡτοίμασται ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου

BYZ **Matthew 20:24** Καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ δέκα ἠγανάκτησαν περὶ τῶν δύο ἀδελφῶν.

3. **To drink the cup** meant to drink the full measure, leaving nothing.
  - a) *It was a common expression that meant to stay with something to the end, to endure to the limits, whatever the cost.*
  - b) **The cup** that Jesus was **about to drink** was immeasurably worse than the physical agony of the cross or the emotional anguish of being forsaken by His friends, painful as those were.
  - c) *The full measure of His **cup** was taking the world's sin upon Himself, an agony so horrible that He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt" ([Matt. 26:39](#)).*
  - d) *Maybe they completely misunderstood what Jesus meant James and John foolishly declared, "**We are able.**"*
  - e) *Before long these two brothers, along with all the other disciples, fled for their lives when Jesus was arrested ([Matt. 26:56](#)).*
4. **"To sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give."**
  - a) *Not only were James and John presumptuous in asking to sit on Jesus' **right and... left**, but it was not, in any case, His prerogative to grant such a request.*
  - b) *Rather, Jesus said, "**It is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.**"*
  - c) *It would not be on the basis of favoritism or ambition that those honors would be bestowed, but on the basis of the Father's sovereign choice.*
  - d) *Personal ambition is not a factor in the sovereign plan of God.*

BYZ **Matthew 20:25** Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτοὺς εἶπεν, Οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ ἄρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν, καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν.

### C. Dominant Dictatorship – vs 25a

**25a** But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them...

1. The other ten disciples had been standing near **Jesus** and overheard what He had been discussing with James, John, and their mother.
2. Now the Lord **called them to Himself** and reminded them of another wrong way of achieving spiritual greatness besides the two they had just demonstrated.
  - a) *Katakuriēō (**lord it over**) is a strong term carrying the idea of ruling down on people, with kata intensifying the verb.*
  - b) *Virtually every government of that day was a form of dictatorship, often of a tyrannical sort.*
3. The world seeks greatness through power – i.e. pharaohs, Antiochus Epiphanes, the caesars, the Herods, and Pilate—under all of whom the Jews had suffered greatly.
4. Many people in high positions cannot resist the temptation to use their power to **lord it over** those under them.

### D. Charismatic Control – vs 25b

**25b** ... and they that are great exercise authority upon them.

1. A fourth wrong way to achieve spiritual greatness is that of charismatic, manipulative control.
2. The expression **great men** (*megaloi*) carries the idea of distinguished, eminent, illustrious, or noble.
  - a) *It represents those who have high personal appeal and have achieved high stature in the eyes of the world and who seek to control others by personal influence.*
  - b) *They can be seen as different in style from those in [vs 25a](#)*
  - c) *Whereas the dominant dictator uses the sheer power of his position and is often hated, the charismatic leader uses the powers of popularity and personality.*
  - d) *By flattery, charm, and attractiveness, he manipulates others to serve his own ends.*
3. **Exercise authority over** also translates a strong and intensified Greek verb, combining *kata* (down) and *exousiazō* (to have authority), and could be rendered "to play the tyrant."

## II. How to Be Great – vs 26-28

### A. The Precept of True Greatness – vs 26-27

26 But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; 27 And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant:

1. The self-serving, self-promoting, self-glorying ways of the world are the antithesis of spiritual greatness.
  - a) They have no place in God's kingdom and are **not** to be **so among you**, Jesus told the Twelve.
  - b) In many different ways He had taught them what He told Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world" ([John 18:36](#)).
2. "**Whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister**"
  - a) God's standard of greatness involves service
  - b) This kind of greatness is pleasing to God, because it is humble and self-giving rather than proud and self-serving.
  - c) The way to the world's greatness is through pleasing and being served by men; the way to God's greatness is through pleasing Him and serving others in His name.
  - d) In God's eyes, the one who is great is the one who is a willing **servant**.
3. "Minister" is from *diakonos*, from which *deacon* is derived
  - a) The original Greek word was purely secular, referring to a person who did menial labor, such as house cleaning or serving tables.
  - b) It was not necessarily a term of dishonor but simply described the lowest level of hired help, who needed little training or skill.
  - c) But Christ elevated *diakonos* to a place of great significance, using it to describe His most faithful and favored disciples.
4. The surest mark of the true **servant** is willing sacrifice for the sake of others in the name of Christ.
5. Jesus reiterated and intensified His description of God's way to greatness: "**Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.**"
  - a) The position and work of a slave were much lower and demeaning even than those of a servant.
  - b) A servant was to some degree his own person.
  - c) He often owned little more than the clothes on his back, but he was free to go where he wanted and to work or not work as he pleased.
  - d) But a **slave** (*doulos*) did not belong to himself but to his master and could go only where the master wanted him to go and do only what the master wanted him to do.
  - e) He did not belong to himself but was the personal property of someone else.
6. In several of his letters Paul identified himself as Christ's slave (*doulos*) even before identifying himself as His apostle.
7. The cost of true greatness is humble, selfless, sacrificial service.
8. The Christian who desires to be **great** and **first** in the kingdom is the one who is willing to serve in the hard place, the uncomfortable place, the lonely place, the demanding place, the place where he is not appreciated and may even be persecuted.

### B. The Pattern for True Greatness – vs 28

28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

1. "Even as the Son of Man"
  - a) Our Savior is a perfect example of service / ministering
  - b) What Jesus says about Himself should also characterize His followers.
  - c) "I am your perfect Pattern," He was saying, "your supreme Example. My attitude should be Your attitude, and My kind of living should be your kind of living. If you want to be great as God wants you to be great, be like Me."

BYZ **Matthew 20:26** Οὐχ οὕτως δὲ ἔσται ἐν ὑμῖν· ἀλλ' ὅς ἐάν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν μέγας γενέσθαι ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος·

Would become great (hos an thelei megas genesthai). Jesus does not condemn the desire to become great. It is a laudable ambition. There are "great ones" (*megaloi*) among Christians as among pagans, but they do not "lord it over" one another (*katakuriuousin*), a LXX word and very expressive, or "play the tyrant" (*katexousiazousin*), another suggestive word.

Your minister (*hūmōn diakonos*). This word may come from *dia* and *konis* (dust), to raise a dust by one's hurry, and so to minister. It is a general word for servant and is used in a variety of ways including the technical sense of our "deacon" in Phil. 1:1. But it more frequently is applied to ministers of the Gospel (1 Cor. 3:5). The way to be "first" (*prōtos*), says Jesus, is to be your "servant" (*doulos*), "bond-servant" (Matthew 20:27). This is a complete reversal of popular opinion then and now.

27 καὶ ὅς ἐάν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος ἔστω ὑμῶν δούλος· 28 ὥσπερ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἤλθεν διακονηθῆναι, ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι, καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν.

A ransom for many (*lutron anti pollōn*). The Son of man is the outstanding illustration of this principle of self-abnegation in direct contrast to the self-seeking of James and John. The word translated "ransom" is the one commonly employed in the papyri as the price paid for a slave who is then set free by the one who bought him, the purchase money for manumitting slaves. See examples in Moulton and Milligan's *Vocabulary and Deissmann's Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 328f. There is the notion of exchange also in the use of *anti*. Jesus gave his own life as the price of freedom for the slaves of sin. There are those who refuse to admit that Jesus held this notion of a substitutionary death because the word in the N.T. occurs only here and the corresponding passage in Mark 10:45. But that is an easy way to get rid of passages that contradict one's theological opinions. Jesus here rises to the full consciousness of the significance of his death for men.

2. To discover what it means to become a godly servant, the disciples had only to look at **the Son of Man Himself**.
3. Jesus **did not come to be served, but to serve**
  - a) *Jesus is the supreme example of humility and servanthood, because, as the sovereign of the universe and of all eternity*
  - b) *He subjected Himself to humiliation and even to death.*
4. During the Last Supper, after the disciples had again been arguing about which of them was the greatest
  - a) *It was probably at this time that Jesus gave them the beautiful object lesson of servanthood recorded by John.*
  - b) *[Jesus] laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.... And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly truly I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."*
5. Jesus' ultimate act of servanthood was **to give His life**.
  - a) *"Greater love has no one than this," He said, "that one lay down his life for his friends" ([John 15:13](#)).*
  - b) *Some years ago, Joe Delaney a star football player for the Kansas City Chiefs, saw three young boys out in a lake, crying out for help and struggling to stay above the water. Although he was himself a poor swimmer, Joe dived into the water and tried to save them. One of the boys was rescued, but Joe and the other two boys drowned. He willingly laid down his life in an effort to save those boys, making the ultimate sacrifice in their behalf.*
6. Then Jesus presents the first explicit NT teaching about the redemptive work of the Messiah.
  - a) *He would vicariously suffer for the sins of mankind as **a ransom** for those who trust in Him.*
  - b) *He did not simply **give His life** an example for others.*
  - c) *He was no mere martyr for a godly cause, as some claim.*
  - d) *Nor was He merely an example of life-giving selflessness, although He was indeed the supreme example of that.*
  - e) *Jesus not only lived and died for others but died as **a ransom** for others.*
7. **Lutron (ransom)** was the term used for the redemption price of a slave, the amount required to buy his freedom.
8. Christ, then, is the pattern for all to follow in being servant leaders.