

*From the pulpit of*



## **The Great Servant**

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**Matthew 20:20-28**

**June 19, 2016**

On this Father's Day I want to break from our sermon series on Ezra and turn our attention to be a Servant as we follow the Great Servant Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us. Specifically I want to address men (and women) and Jesus' call to be a servant. I know the vision of servanthood is a good one but it's not one that I naturally gravitate towards. A man once spoke of his relationship with his family by saying, "I want to 'outserve' everyone in my family." I feel the sentiment, but there are other things I would rather be pursuing like being 'awesome' and 'great'; not in a totally selfish way, but more in a 'Steve Jobs awesome kind of way.'

Jobs was the founder of Apple computer which makes the Mac, iPod, iPad and iPhone. He was a man who pursued greatness with a passion. He said, "My passion has been to build a company where people were motivated to make great products."<sup>1</sup> He poured all he had into pursuing this greatness, because he was going after changing the world through his products. As a Mac commercial says, "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." Steve Jobs had an intense drive for greatness and that's what stirs in me.

Most of you in here have a drive for greatness. You want your life to be significant. You have a desire to feel like you have accomplished something. You want to be recognized as someone who has made some type of positive dent in this world. But you are also a follower of Jesus. I didn't know Steve Jobs, but he didn't seem to be a follower of Jesus (perhaps in his last days he trusted Christ). Yet, some of that drive for greatness that was in Steve Jobs is also in you. How do you reconcile the reality that you follow Jesus while at the same time having an internal impulse for greatness? Do you shut Jesus out as you push forward in life, or do you invite Jesus in while squashing any hint of ambition? I don't think you do either. Jesus does not condemn the desire for greatness; He simply flips it. Greatness from God's viewpoint is different than greatness in the eyes of the world. Greatness in the eyes of the world is striving with God out of the picture. But greatness in God's eyes is sacrificial love and service for the glory of God. Don't throw away ambition for greatness, but seek greatness for the glory of God by being a servant to others. Jesus will show you how.

Let's turn to Matthew 20:20-28. Jesus is just a few weeks away from His death and is intentionally headed to the cross to lay down His life for sinners. He is still with his disciples and teaching them. In our context today we are going to see his interaction with a helicopter mom who is hovering over her two boys and pushing for their success. Look at the interaction starting in Matthew 20:20: "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, page 567.

kneeling before him she asked him for something.” There is a good chance that this mom is likely his Aunt Salome, the sister of his mother, Mary. She is not acting alone in this request, but is probably put up to it by her two boys, James and John. There is clearly some type of power struggle going on here among the disciples, as these two are trying to sneak in and jump ahead of the rest. Verses 21: “And he said to her, ‘What do you want?’ She said to him, ‘Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” Flashback to Jesus’ words in 19:28: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” She and her sons know this ruling authority is coming. They are headed to the most prominent city of Jerusalem and they know that the Messiah will one day be the conquering ruler, perhaps even soon.<sup>2</sup> But before they get there, they want to be assured that they get the most prominent seats at Jesus’ left and right hand. Isn’t it ironic that soon Jesus will have one on his left and right, but they will be common criminals as he hangs on the cross.<sup>3</sup>

Verse 22: “Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.” The ‘cup’ is referring to Jesus’ suffering and death. On the cross Jesus suffered not only physically, but God’s wrath was poured out on Him. Suffering is also the ‘cup’ for the disciples who follow Him. The brothers say they are ‘all in’ and able to drink the cup, but they misunderstand what ‘all in’ means. They understand like the rest of us that in order to be successful, there have to be some hard times mixed in with the good. These brothers are ready for both, yet they don’t clearly see that the suffering in the future could even be suffering unto death. Verse 23: “He said to them, ‘You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” James and John will indeed drink from the cup of suffering for Jesus’ sake. James will be martyred (Acts 12:2) and John will be locked away in prison. But even suffering will not determine positions of greatness; that is decided by the Father alone.

The other disciples are not thrilled as we see in verse 24: “And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.” The disciples are upset that these two brothers are seeking the inside track and trying to pull off a higher rank through family ties. The brothers are trying to edge ahead of the disciples, which creates jealousy and anger. Jesus goes on to show them that this is not the way the Kingdom works. Verse 25: “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” The Jews knew how the Gentiles functioned, because the Romans ruled them with military might and heavy taxation.<sup>4</sup> Those who exercise authority in the world often abuse their power through domination, manipulation, and control.<sup>5</sup> And that manipulation, domination, and control for power can be in our hearts as well. We can ambitiously strive in life in such a way that lords power over others and hurts them.<sup>6</sup> This type of aggressive selfishness starts when we are young. One of our EBF college students shared with me about growing up with his siblings. He says, “I imposed my will on my siblings whenever I could. I was the biggest and strongest, so I took what I wanted when I wanted and demanded that my siblings serve me in whatever way I could force them to. I never relinquished my rights, because that would be showing weakness and lessening my power over them.” I appreciate his honesty because we see some of those same manifestations of selfishness in

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<sup>2</sup> RT France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, page 756.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary Matthew*, 669.

<sup>5</sup> James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World*, page 188.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, page 678.

us. As kids grow up they become college students, adults, husbands and wives and fellow co-workers, but that desire to be great by crushing others is still there and causes explosions all over the place. Jesus has another way to greatness.

Verse 26a: "It shall not be so among you." Jesus has something else in mind for His followers. It's not a path away from ambition and greatness, but a path where the pursuit of greatness is flipped. Verse 26b-27: "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave..." A "servant" was one who was hired to take care of the house, food, and a variety of other menial tasks. A "slave" was even lower than a servant, because they were forced to serve others. A servant and a slave did not live their lives focusing on themselves, but serving others. Jesus is calling His people to intentionally and deliberately serve others. In fact, some of the early followers of Christ referred to themselves as servants and slaves of Christ. If you have ambition to be great, then serve others. You should use whatever ambition and power you have and leverage it for others in Jesus' name. It's where you make sacrifices and use your power to empower others without focusing on your return.<sup>7</sup> James and John started to walk in this servant path as they led the early church. John served the church in leading and we have some of his writing in the New Testament and James gave up his life as the first martyr.<sup>8</sup>

The servant life is the path of Jesus. Verse 28: "...even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The call is to imitate Christ. Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. Specifically He came to serve in giving His life as a ransom for many. Let me explain the concept of ransom. It has the idea of paying a price to release someone from captivity. Jesus has paid the price of His death on the cross to turn away the wrath of God and to release sinners who have been held captive to sin. All those who receive Jesus' payment for their sins through faith are forgiven and rescued. We are freed from the master of sin and are now able to serve the Lord Jesus with joy. Whereas before we would have been locked into one way of pursuing ambition and greatness, we are now free from the slavery of sin through the death of Christ. Romans 6:6,14a: "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin...For sin will have no dominion over you..." Since you are free from the dominion of sin, you are now free to serve others, so don't ever say that Jesus was able to serve others because He was Jesus and you are just a sinner. You are free from the dominion of sin in the Gospel of Christ; now you have the freedom and the power to imitate Christ and serve others.

This means that as a Christian, your life will look different than that of others. Even the way you finish up school and function in your career will look different. Dave Harvey, in *Rescuing Ambition*, puts ambition in a God-focused perspective. He says this concerning your career: "The career path of the Christian looks different than for others. We should not be hungry for our own name or unrestrained in our self-promotion... If God submitted his great majesty to the call of servanthood, we can submit our musical talents, our teaching desires, our motivational skills to the call of servanthood as well." It's like we take all of our gifts and talents and use them for the glory of God in the service for others. Jesus' sacrificial death is the standard.

Conclusion: Jesus doesn't squash ambition, but flips it. He calls us to pursue greatness in God's eyes rather than man's. Godly ambition is living for the glory of God in serving others. May God give us the faith to see it! One of the most frustrating things in preaching a sermon like this is that most of you already know it. Be a servant like Jesus was a servant. It's your basic Sunday

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<sup>7</sup> Wilkins, page 678.

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School lesson, but unfortunately a lot of us would like to hear about being a servant and talk about being a servant, but not intentionally and deliberately be a servant. A missionary once said that the American church talks a lot about serving and compassion and then one hour later they're still talking about it. I feel like we are missing out on the joy of serving the Lord.

Let's do more than talk about being a servant. Let's choose to be servants. Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, has a book called, *Great by Choice*. It shows the characteristics of companies and leaders who have consistently had success over a long period of time; not by accident, but by the intentional choices they made. In the same way I think we can all today be "servants by choice" in that we make intentional and deliberate choices to pursue significance and greatness for the glory of God in becoming servants and slaves of Christ. Can you imagine strategizing and setting goals to give your life away for others? It's the life of joy.

Here is how you do it: you start with those closest to you and work your way out from family, roommates, church, neighbors, work, school, and the world. Remember the quote I mentioned earlier about a man saying that he wants to 'outserve his family.' I remember when I first got saved as a counselor at Kanakuk Camp, they stressed being a servant over and over again. Modeling servanthood in every area of life. In every context of life, see how you can outserve others as you walk in the path of the Great Servant Jesus Christ who outserved all through His death and resurrection. Let's follow in the footsteps of Jesus and ambitiously seek greatness by choosing to be servants. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, June 19, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.