



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Getting a Handle on Greatness

Matthew 20.17–34

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Introduction

How surprised at the outcome was she? She did what any mother who loved her children would do, what we would expect any mother to do. She wanted what was best for her boys. So, she gladly took the lead in asking for the favor on their behalf. And when the others got upset? Well, they were just jealous that she and her boys had gotten there first. Given what we know about how the world works, what she did makes perfect sense.

But once again, Jesus did the unexpected, telling her and her eager-to-get-ahead sons that they didn't really know what they were asking and their view of how the world should work was wrong. You could hardly blame them if they were confused.

How surprised at the outcome are we? We understand why they didn't immediately get it. We're practically programmed from birth to try to get ahead, taught that good parents do whatever they can to help their children achieve greatness.

Jesus would have agreed, with the idea of seeking greatness at least. But his view of what greatness is was very different. And that is a lesson we need to review often.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

To summarize what happened and the motives involved, in Matthew 20.20–21, the wife of Zebedee asks if her sons, James and John, can be given the two top advisory positions in Jesus's coming kingdom. It's not a great reach to suspect they had told her how Jesus had promised they would sit on one of the twelve thrones (Matt 19.28). It's also not unreasonable to infer her name was Salome (Matt. 27.55–56; Mark 15.40), she was the sister of Jesus's mother (John 19.25), and therefore she expected a special place because they were Jesus's cousins (Blomberg 1992, 306).

That they had trouble comprehending the nature of the life he was calling them to is not surprising. This was yet another in a series of attempts by Jesus to get his followers to see that his way was different from anything they had known before. Focusing only on the events as

they entered Judea on the way to Jerusalem (Matt 19.1), we see that: his teaching on marriage and divorce shocked them (19.3–12); his designation of the children they rebuked as the model for kingdom citizens showed a different standard of acceptance (19.13–15); his teaching about how little wealth had to do with kingdom citizenship left them incredulous (19.16–30); his story about workers who worked the least being paid the same as those who worked most uprooted commonly accepted beliefs about the way things work (20.1–16).

What They Knew—And What They Didn't

One of the biggest challenges for Jesus in his ministry was getting his disciples and the crowds to see that so much of what they “knew” about how life works was wrongheaded. For example, many of them “knew” that when he came, the Lord’s anointed would make his people proud as he ousted the Gentiles;¹ they did not expect him to be handed over to those Gentiles and executed (Matt 20.17–19). They “knew” that two insignificant blind beggars should not be permitted to get in the way of the swelling crowd waiting to welcome their King just fifteen miles from the city (20.29–34) (Blomberg 1992, 309). They also “knew” that position mattered, that those on top mattered more, and that favors were sometimes needed and given (20.20–28).

Each time, Jesus said they didn’t really know. For the third time, he told them things would not end well in Jerusalem; this time, he included more details than before (20.17–19; cf. 16.21; 17.22–23). When he heard the two blind men the growing crowds sought to silence, he stopped the procession to take time with and heal the men (20.29–34). Finally, speaking directly to James and John, and then to the twelve, he told them what following him would entail:

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.” 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.” ... 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. It shall not be so among you (Matt 20.22–23, 25–26a).

To drink the cup was an OT figure for suffering, especially suffering caused by God’s wrath (cf. Ps 75.8; Isa 51.17) (Blomberg 1992, 307). By using the figure, he was warning them what continuing their association with him would mean. Their status would not be based on the power-of-position pyramid common in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. No, their commitment to follow him would: (a) involve a cross (20.17–19); (b) require them to imitate his example of caring for those who were considered insignificant (20.32–34); and (c) mean they would swap “greatness” as commonly defined for menial, slave-like service, imitating Jesus who modeled what a servant (διάκονος, *diakonos*) should be (20.26–28).²

¹ See *Psalms of Solomon* 17.21–22: “Behold, O Lord, and raise up to them their king, the son of David, at the time, in the which you choose, O God, that he may reign over Israel your servant. And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers. And that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample (her) down to destruction” (trans. Craig A. Evans, et. al. 2009. Oak Tree Software).

² For a summary of the views of service as menial and undignified in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, see Inrig 1983, 336–337.

Some Things We Need to Know

First, we need to learn and internalize the truth that God doesn't see greatness as we do. At one level, of course, we have already learned this. We see the principle in the OT where the LORD disavowed the Israelites of the notion that their success was due to their greatness and special qualities and then reassured them they would overcome greater nations because he was with them (Deut 7.1–8, 17–19). And we've read Jesus's direct statement of the point in Matthew 20.25–27. So, intellectually, we've learned this truth.

But we are part of a world that continues to operate according to the same standards as the one Jesus inhabited. Listen to how we use the word *great* to refer to events, success, nations, and even churches; often the gauges we use to measure greatness are wealth, might, power, position, and numbers. So, we need to hear—and hear again and again—how Jesus defined greatness:

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. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20.25–28).

Second, we should recall that Jesus's way of greatness led to his victory. His disciples would question that, for his life of self-sacrifice ended in betrayal, mocking, flogging, and crucifixion (cf. Matt 20.18–19, 28). But he defeated death and overcame opponents who thought they had ended him. As we are tempted to keep trying the world's way, we need to remember that his victory came through surrender and giving his life as a ransom (cf. 1 Cor 15.51–57).

Third, we need to be reminded that Jesus's way has been proven right again and again. James (Acts 12) and John (Rev 1.9), who ultimately imitated him, are exhibits A and B that drinking his cup and going to the cross are in fact the models for true service and ultimate victory.

Conclusion

“The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20.28). About this text, Craig Blomberg comments:

Few models are more desperately needed in an age of celebrity Christianity, high-tech evangelism and worship, and widespread abuses of ecclesiastical power for self-aggrandizement or, more insidiously, in the name of ‘attracting’ more people to the gospel—a ‘gospel’ that is thereby badly truncated” (Blomberg 1992, 308).

Jesus showed the greatness he taught and calls us to exhibit. Do we believe? Will we follow?

Works Cited

- Craig L. Blomberg. 1992. *Matthew*. The New American Commentary. vol. 22. ed. David S. Dockery. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
- J. Gary Inrig. 1983. “Called to Serve: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, no. 560: 335–349.

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