

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Attaining Greatness In God's Kingdom

By Brian Kenyon

“Who is the greatest?” is a question often asked. The answer to that question, obviously, depends on a context. Is the person asking who is the greatest athlete, musician, or entertainer? Whatever the case, the person thought to be the greatest must have done something of which people know to have attained that greatness. True, ultimate greatness, however, is not measured by man, but by God. This greatness is not attained on a field of play, upon a stage before great audiences, nor in a Hollywood studio.

The apostles were often selfishly concerned with who would be the greatest among them (Mt. 18:1; Mk. 9:34; Lk. 9:46; 22:26), which brings us to the question, “How do we attain greatness in God's kingdom?” Jesus' answer may surprise us!

The Concern About Greatness

Let us note an incident in Jesus' life that provided an excellent opportunity for Him to teach how greatness in His kingdom is and is not attained.

Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. ²¹And 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. ²²But 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. ²³And 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. ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. ²⁵But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. ²⁶But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mt. 20:20-28)

How Greatness Is Not Attained

Considering the passage above, let us notice three ways that greatness in the kingdom of God is not attained. First, it is not attained by what someone else can do for us, not even our mothers! No doubt, the mother of Zebedee's children only wanted what she thought was best for her children, as any mother would. She came to the right person, Jesus. She came in the right manner, “worshipping [kneeling down, NKJ].” She came to Jesus in faith, believing the promised kingdom would be a reality one day. She

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was also a regular member of the disciple group that often accompanied Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:56). By her request of one being on the “right hand” and the other on the “left,” she was asking the highest places of honor for her sons. The promise recorded in Matthew 19:28 is likely the background of her request—she wants her sons to be chief among the “twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”! Perhaps Jesus’ rebuke of Peter (Mt. 16:23), gave this mother hope that her sons were now the front runners for Jesus’ choosing. Whatever the case, her request was to no avail, as will be further noted below!

Our attaining greatness in God’s kingdom cannot be done for us by someone else, not even our mothers! Others can certainly influence us (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5), but we ourselves must live the life God has set for us in order to attain that greatness in the kingdom!

Second, greatness in the kingdom of God is not attained by what we might expect. In response to their mother’s request, Jesus asked the brothers, “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?” (Mt. 20:22). Both drinking “the cup” and being “baptized” are here used figuratively for suffering. Part of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden before His betrayal was “let this cup pass from me” (Mt. 26:39). Although textual variants exist concerning “baptism” in Matthew 20:22, baptism is used by Jesus elsewhere figuratively to refer to suffering. Well after being immersed by John the Baptist, Jesus said, “I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened [distressed,

NKJ] till it be accomplished” (Lk. 12:50). By this, He referred to His crucifixion and the surrounding events. When the disciples answered Jesus, “We are able” (Mt. 20:22b), they were undoubtedly sincere, but they failed miserably at first when put to the test (cf. Mt. 26:56). Eventually, the

sons of Zebedee did “drink the cup” of suffering for the Lord. James was slain with a sword (Acts 12:2) and John was exiled to the island of Patmos, “for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:9). Jesus made clear that greatness in the kingdom is not earned but “prepared” (Mt. 20:23 cf. Mt 25:34). Jesus’ saying that it “is not mine to give” shows that He cannot act independently of the Father. Jesus cannot, nor could He ever, do something on His own that was not part of the Father’s will (cf. Jn. 10:30)!

At the time their mother made that request to Jesus, the sons of Zebedee had little idea what attaining greatness in God’s kingdom involved. Jesus’ answer was not what they expected, neither in theory nor practice. However, Jesus is the Master, and what He says concerning greatness in His kingdom and how it is attained must be followed, though it is not what the world might expect!

Third, greatness in the kingdom of God is not attained like the world attains greatness. The “indignation” the ten felt toward the sons of Zebedee was not because of their righteous concerns (Mt. 20:24). The ten were angered because the two brothers might gain those high positions rather than them. Jesus was displeased with the ten as well as the two, so He called all of them to hear what He was about to say. “Ye know” was an appeal to common knowledge. It is the way of the world for “princes [rulers, NKJ]” to lord their authority over others. Worldly rulers look for the highest possible place and take advantage of it by asserting their authority, often ruthlessly. Jesus, of course, was not here objecting to authority (cf. Jn. 19:11), but to the abuse of authority! True greatness is not attained like the “dog eat dog” world of the Gentiles!

How Greatness Is Attained

Having given three ways greatness in God’s kingdom is not attained, Jesus now teaches us how greatness is attained. He introduces this by the contrasting statement, “But it shall not be so among you” (Mt. 20:26a). Then, He proceeds to give two ways greatness in the kingdom is attained.

First, greatness in the kingdom of God is attained through service and slavery (Mt. 20:26b-27). In contrast to being a ruler, Jesus said true greatness is attained by being a “minister [servant, NKJ].” The Greek word here is the same word from which we get “deacon” (διάκονος). This word originally referred to

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a “table waiter,” then came to be used for a servant of any kind, and, of course, it is used in three of its thirty New Testament occurrences to refer to a special servant of the local church, translated “deacon” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). Not only is true greatness attained by being a minister, Jesus also said the one who is truly great in the kingdom would be a “servant [slave, NKJ].” Again, note the contrast: *slaves*, not princes nor rulers, are truly great. This is the complete opposite of what the world thinks! This, of course, does not mean there are to be no positions of authority in the church (cf. elders, 1 Thes. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17), but that these positions are to be filled by those who are of a humble disposition (cf. elder’s qualifications, 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).

Consider also two other places in Matthew where Jesus shows true greatness that is contrary to what the world would think.

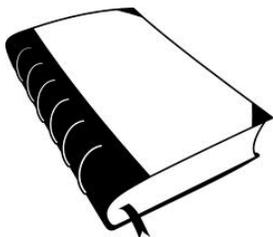
Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but *whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great* in the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:19, emphasis added)

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, *Who is the greatest* in the kingdom of heaven? ²And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, ³And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. ⁴*Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest* in the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 18:1-5, emphasis added)

Rather than being attained through high worldly positions, true greatness is attained through service and slavery to King Jesus!

Second, greatness in the kingdom of God is attained by following the example of Jesus (Mt. 20:28).

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By saying “Even as the Son of man,” Jesus used Himself to prove the point He just made about service and slavery. Jesus did not come so others could serve Him. Rather, He “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men,” so He, “being found in fashion as a man,” could humble “himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). No greater, self-less service could one render than to become the one and only “ransom,” paying the price for all mankind’s freedom from sin. We were captured and enslaved to sin by our own voluntary yielding (cf. Jn. 8:34; Rom. 6:16), but even in that condition, Jesus died for us, taking the place for our deserved consequences of sin (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:21). If we are to attain true greatness in God’s kingdom, let us follow the example of Jesus!

Conclusion

Who is the greatest? Not the one who relies on the good others do, nor the one who cannot see past his or her own expectations, nor the one who seeks it by the world’s standards. Greatness in God’s kingdom can only be attained through service and slavery to God and following the example of Jesus! Are you great in the kingdom of God? 

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Tuesday	__ 8:30-12:00	Life of Paul (262)	J. Stearsman	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Preparation and Delivery of Sermons (203)	Bauer	3
Wednesday	__ 8:30-12:00	Ezekiel and Daniel (214)	J. Stearsman	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Topical Studies (134)	D. Stearsman	3
Thursday	__ 8:30-12:00	First and Second Thessalonians (237)	Kenyon	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Sermon on the Mount (203)	Wheeler	3
Friday	__ 8:30-12:00	World Religions (275)	Wheeler	3
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Thursday	__ 6:00-8:30	Gospel of John (227) (Orange Street church of Christ, Auburndale)	Bauer	2.5
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