

## “How to be truly great” Matthew 20:25-28

### **Introduction:**

**1. At the United States Air Force Academy outside of Colorado Springs there is an interesting tradition at each year’s graduation.** Graduates receive their degrees in order of class rank. If you have the best grade point average for four years, you receive your diploma first. If you have the worst class rank, you receive your diploma last. It is both exhilarating and embarrassing.

**2. Imagine if we were all line up before God based on eternal rank.** Who do you think would be first? Who would be last? What do you think would be your eternal rank?

**3. It seems that rank was very much on the minds of the characters in a very interesting Bible story that appears in Matthew 20:20-28 on pages 1530-1531.**

*Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.*

*"What is it you want?" he asked.*

*She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."*

*"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"*

*"We can," they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."*

*When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

**4. Centuries of Christians have criticized Mrs. Zebedee for asking Jesus to seat her sons at his right and left.** I have never understood that criticism. In fact, Jesus himself was quite understanding. What could be better than a godly mother who wants her sons to be as close to Jesus as they can possibly get?

**5. Jesus never condemns the desire for greatness nor the quest for high eternal rank.** Rather, he explains how to be truly great. For, what is frequently mistaken for greatness in our world is just the opposite by the standards of heaven. In fact, Jesus is quoted at the end of the previous chapter in the Bible saying “*many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*”

**6. For those who desire to be truly great for God, listen to the advice from Jesus:**

## I. Use strengths for others

## Matthew 20:25-26a

1. **Jesus' first advice is to use strength for others.** He uses a negative example to explain what he means: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."*

2. **Jesus was talking about a common practice in the Roman empire that is still followed by many people today.** It is to use authority for selfish purposes. These are the people who already have lots of strength and bully others with it in order to get more. They enjoy bossing others around. They feel good when they make others feel bad.

This is the employer who likes to keep employees running scared. This is the parent who always shows children who is the boss. This is the big guy who pushes others around. This is the manager who orders subordinates to do things he should be doing for himself. This is the person who abuses power - emotionally, physically, sexually, economically.

He knows he is stronger and loves using that strength to build himself up and tear others down.

3. **Jesus says: "Not so with you!"**

Followers of Jesus Christ use their strength to help not hurt, to build up not tear down, to make others stronger not weaker.

4. **In simplest terms, this is the Christian who has the right of way on the road or in the parking lot but gives it up to let the other car in.**

In bigger terms, this is the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who avoids a multi-million dollar bonus to raise the pay of hourly workers by 50 cents or a dollar an hour.

5. **We all have strengths.** Few of us are at the low end of the pecking order.

Jesus here teaches us that true greatness is using whatever strengths we have to benefit others rather than ourselves.

## II. Look to serve

## Matthew 20:26a

1. **Jesus' second advice is to look to serve.** He said: *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."*

2. **In 1900 the number one occupation in America was farming with about 51% of our population.** The #2 occupation was "domestic servant." Yet, today, most of us have never met a domestic servant. We live in a society where the occupation has largely disappeared, so most of us don't really understand what Jesus was talking about.

3. **A servant is defined as a person who is employed to do something for someone else.** In extreme cases, it is to do what others don't want to do.

Illustration: The closest I remember coming to working as a servant was years ago in an east coast department store. My job was to do whatever anyone else said and it was usually what no one else wanted to do.

*Jesus:  
Parable Peter*

For example, I was assigned to wash the walls in the ladies rest room. They probably hadn't been cleaned in a generation. The ceilings were high so I had to climb a ladder with a bucket and sponge. Because it was the only available rest room in the area, it couldn't be closed for me to work. So, every time someone came in I had to climb down the ladder and wait in the hall. It was a dirty, embarrassing job that felt like it lasted forever. I was a servant.

Application: Jesus said: "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."

Steve Sjogren -  
cleaning toilet

**4. You might think that there would be few volunteers for service in modern affluent America, but that would be an incorrect guess. Americans lead the world in volunteerism.**

- Peter Drucker says that every second American adult serves as a volunteer in American's non-profit sector, averaging at least three hours a week. That makes non-profits America's largest employer.<sup>i</sup>
- Gallup reports there were 93 million adult volunteers in America in 1995, averaging 218 hours each per year. In addition to the adults there are an additional 13 million teen volunteers (ages 12-17) averaging 182 hours each per year.<sup>ii</sup>
- Volunteers abound at Wooddale Church. There are ~~hundreds~~ of thousands of volunteer hours put into Wooddale Church every year by many hundreds of people. You teach Sunday School, perform in drama, work around the building, call people on the phone, sing and play in music ministry, usher, do clerical work, lead ministries, care for children, and help out in a long list of social services.

This is a volunteer organization. We have comparatively few staff for the massive amount of good services which are done. Almost everything done in this church is done by volunteers. You are amazing. You are fantastic. But, most of the volunteer service by Wooddalers isn't done here. My guess is that you volunteer 10 hours outside of Wooddale Church for every hour inside Wooddale Church. You tutor children, coach teams, help out in inner city programs, build Habitat houses, volunteer at schools, take care of sick relatives, provide meals for families with need, travel overseas providing everything from surgery in Africa to house-building in Central America.

**5. I'm not here to recruit. I'm here to thank.** Thank you for all you do. Thank you for being the way Jesus advised Christians to be. Thank you for looking to serve. You are great because "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."

### III. Choose the shadows

### Matthew 20:27

**1. Jesus' third advice is to choose the shadows.** This is exactly the opposite of our world's popular notion of greatness. We typically think of the greatest person as the one up front, the man in the middle, the woman in the spotlight, the leader with the most recognition.

Not according to Jesus. He said: "*whoever wants to be first must be your slave.*"

**2. Slaves live in the shadows.** Their job is to make their masters look good. Everyone is expected to see the master and know the master's name. Slaves are supposed to be invisible. Slaves are anonymous.

**3. It is a consistent theme throughout the Bible that God chooses for greatness those who prefer the shadows.**

Moses insisted that he could not speak, that he didn't want to be an up front person, that Aaron was far better than he. God took the stuttering, humble man in the shadows and made him the greatest law giver in history.

Saul was a young Jewish man who hid when Samuel wanted to anoint him king of Israel. He hid in the baggage rather than stand in the spotlight. God chose him to be king.

David was chosen to be the next king. After he was anointed to be king he took a job as a servant to his predecessor, Saul.

John the Baptist was the most popular man in Israel but insisted that he step out of the spotlight into the shadows. He stepped back to point people to Jesus and Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest man who ever lived.

St. John the Apostle insisted that he remain anonymous. Did you know that he never calls himself by name in the Gospel of John? He always refers to himself as "the other disciple" or "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He chose the shadows to the point of staying anonymous.

**4. I have sometimes wondered who will be the most famous people in heaven.** I suspect that they will be names we have never before heard. Humble people. Anonymous people. Servants in the shadows. Christians who always put Jesus in the limelight. Men and women who didn't want anyone to see them or to honor them. Heroes who gave the glory to Jesus Christ.

**5. It is totally a matter of trust.** If I don't trust God to give me the recognition I need, I must fight for my own honor. If I totally trust God to honor whom he chooses to honor, I need never fight for recognition.

**6. If you want to be great, give the spotlight to Jesus and choose the shadows for yourself.**

So  $\xi$  a — to enhance the reputation of God.

let not slaves be known by masters' names -

Lord Ogden is: "He made slaves great" @ Holywood Prod.

Jesus: Fred Craddock story: Andy (then; Blue / Ben Am); Old man: "What do you do?" ("I'm a preacher.") "I'm going to take you a story." Born in these mountains. Mother not married. Obama. Perfectionist to grow in field. never Afing China. ~~for~~ President: "Boy, you're a child of... a child of... I see a striking resemblance." "I was born that day!" Mine? Ben Hester. (2x governor of Tennessee). "He claim your inheritance."

### IV. Be like Jesus

### Matthew 20:28

- 1. **Jesus' fourth advice is to be like him.** Referring to himself as the "Son of Man" he said "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve . . . ."
- 2. **Of course, it only makes sense that a Christian would want to be like Jesus.** But, here especially, he says that we are to be like him in that he left heaven to become a servant.
- 3. **It is a mind boggling story.** Jesus was forever the eternal Son of God. He lived in heaven where his every request was granted. When he spoke worlds came into existence. Angels by the millions instantly answered his every desire.  
Then he came to earth where he was born in a stable, grew up working in a carpenter shop, touched people that had diseases no one else would touch, and got down on his knees to wash the dirty feet of ordinary men.

- 4. **I hardly know what comparison to make.**  
Bill Gates taking a minimum wage job in the computer department of Best Buy?  
John Elway working as sod keeper at Mile High Stadium?  
Billy Graham starting a church in rural Africa?  
Amy Grant taking voice lessons from me?

5. **Jesus was the most important person in the universe. He became a servant. He was great!**

6. **Let me tell you where I have most personally seen this happen. It is here.**  
Regularly I meet people who say to me, "I know someone from Wooddale Church." I'll ask who and a name is given. Then I say, "Sure I know him. Yeah, I know her. He teaches fourth grade Sunday School. She works in the nursery. They help out in the Wednesday night children's program. The one who ushers every Sunday." Then I am told, "Really? Do you know who he is? Do you know what she does?"

This is when it can get a little embarrassing. The stranger tells me, "He's the CEO of the large corporation where I work. She's one of the most successful people in her field. You're talking about one of the most prominent physicians in the Twin Cities. He's our top salesperson in the company."

And I say, "Oh, well I only know about that person working in the nursery." But I think to myself, "That's great . . . just like Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve!" Just like Jesus!

### V. Be ready to sacrifice

### Matthew 20:28

- 1. **Jesus' fifth and final advice he knows better than anyone else.** He tells anyone who wants to be great for God to be ready to sacrifice.
- 2. **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** There never has been and never will be anyone greater than Jesus.

There never has been and never will be a greater sacrifice than Jesus giving up his life to die on the cross to ransom us sinners from eternal death.

**3. He just wanted us to know that greatness through service always has a price.**

The cost is often time - - it takes a lot of hours to serve others.

The cost may be recognition - - servants are seldom famous or adequately honored.

The cost may be criticism - - often the best of servants are criticized for what they do.

① Use strengths for others

② Look to serve

③ Choose the shadows

④ Be like Jesus

**4. Sacrifice is giving up something that you have every right to keep.**

It is the mark of a truly great person.

10/3/99 Twins last place. Ticket in car.

⑤ Be ready to sacrifice

**Conclusion:**

**1. In 1986 the Minnesota Twins finished in last place in the American League.**

In 1987 they won the pennant and the World Series. I remember conversations with friends around the country who kept saying, "I don't know much about the Twins. I've never heard of any of the players before.

In many ways, it was a "no name team." But . . . the world champions.

**2. That's who we are.** That's what we want to be. The church of Jesus Christ. A no name team . . . servants who bring glory and honor to our Champion: Jesus!

**3. God bless every one of you who faithfully serves for the sake of Jesus Christ! You are truly great!**

2/1/98 Wooddale Church

10/4/99 CB Northeast @ Pelham Lake, NY

<sup>i</sup>Peter F. Drucker, MANAGING THE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990, page xiii.

<sup>ii</sup>"Teens Outdo Adults In Volunteering," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, April 24, 1997, page E15.

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