

# Greatness

Matthew 20:17-34

Jesus made Himself of no reputation, took on the form of a servant, lived without sin, and died on the cross in order to redeem us from sin and death so that we would reign with Him now. James and John want the crown without the cross, but sometimes we don't even want the crown. We want the couch until Christ comes back. But the way of Christ is cross and then crown, humility and then greatness. Even though our final glorification will occur at the resurrection, Jesus shows us how to follow Him now.

## The Way of the Cross

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the last time (v. 17). Jerusalem is higher than the surrounding region and so the Jews would sing the psalms of ascent (Pss. 120-134) as they went up into the presence of Lord to worship in His heavenly courts. Christ is the King riding into the royal city of David to take His place on the throne (21:5ff; Zech. 9:9). The multitudes cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (21:9), and Jesus doesn't discourage them. The disciples expect Him to take over the throne and lead the nations into peace just as the prophets said (Jer. 23:5-7; Ezek. 34:23-30). Instead, He predicts for the third time that "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again" (vv. 18-19). He will go up to Jerusalem and to become King, but the crown will be one of thorns and the coronation ceremony His mocking, scourging, and crucifixion. Then He will rise. Invented by the Persians but perfected by the Romans, as Herodotus said, crucifixion was the most shameful of deaths, reserved for criminals who would be exposed in agony for everyone to see what happens to those who rebel against the nation. And the Jews believed those who hung from a tree were cursed (Dt. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). Jesus just said that the first will be last and the last first (19:30; 20:16). Herod, Pontius Pilate, the chief priests and scribes will do their worst, but God will bring out of it the salvation of the world. Christ makes Himself last, trusting the Father to raise Him up above all.

## On the Right & Left of Christ

James and John, "sons of thunder", might take after their mom who is equally bold. She kneels before Jesus and asks Him for one son to sit on His right and the other on His left in the kingdom (vv. 20-22). Jesus just told the disciples that they will sit on twelve thrones, ruling over Israel (19:28), and it doesn't take long for them to wonder whose seat will be closest to Him. He says they don't know what they ask: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Nor do they know what they answer: "We are able" (v. 22). The idea here is of a victorious king who celebrates at a banquet and shares the "cup" with his people. James and John want drink beside Jesus, sharing in His glory and power. But the psalmist also speaks about the cup of judgment God will pour out on the wicked of the earth (Ps. 75:8; cf. Jer. 25:15-29). Jesus is not talking about pouring out the cup of wrath on others, but about drinking it Himself. Similarly, His "baptism" is coming. Peter says the flood is a type that looked forward to baptism (the antitype) wherein "eight souls were saved through water" (1 Pet. 3:20, 21). Those eight people didn't get wet, but the nations that were filled with violence did. Jesus committed no sin but bore ours on the cross, taking the judgment of baptism upon Himself. Anyone want to sit on His right and left and share in that? The two thieves will soon suffer beside Him for their crimes (27:38). We are baptized into Christ's death and therefore drink His cup; everything Jesus did, He did on your behalf, which is what

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it means to be “in” Him. But James and John will also suffer and rise, which is what it means to follow Jesus. Once the Spirit is given at Pentecost, they will be ready to drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism, but it’s the Father’s job to determine who sits where (v. 23). The other ten disciples are really unhappy with them, not because they understood the way of the cross but because James and John beat them to the punch (v. 24). This is not the way it works in God’s kingdom: “But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (vv. 25-28). The Gentiles lord their authority over others, but Jesus lays down His life for others. Both kinds of leaders want to be great, but the difference is why and how. A servant (*diakonos*) is someone who ministers the thing needed. A slave (*doulos*) is someone whose time is not his own. Romans would typically achieve greatness by birth, battle, or bureaucracy, but Christ tells us to do it by loving and serving others. This includes courageous decision-making and truth-telling. In the world God made, authority flows to those who take responsibility—who love and care for the things they are called to—and it flees from those who complain, bark, blameshift, and try to control without sacrifice. This applies in school, homes, marriages, families, and businesses. We should want to sit near Jesus, to be great, and how we serve reveals how much we do. When we don’t know God very well this sounds servile, like others will walk all over us. But no one ever walked over Jesus. This mindset is how He overcame the world and why God “has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). He gave Himself as a ransom for many, and He continues to serve us (Heb. 7:25).

## The Gift of Sight

A great multitude follows Jesus out of Jericho, and another pair “on the road” (vv. 30, 17), this time two blind men, call on Him to do something for them. They cry out, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” (vv. 29-30). The great multitude warns them to be quiet, and they respond by yelling louder (v. 31). This causes Jesus to stop and ask what they want Him to do: “Lord, that our eyes may be opened” (v. 33). He has compassion, touches their eyes, and immediately they see and follow Him (v.34). The multitude thinks like the twelve and Zebedee’s wife. Jesus ascends to Jerusalem to be crowned, so why should a couple blind guys hold things up? This is not going to get us what we want. But because Jesus came to serve, and not be served, the transformation of those He loves is His exaltation. Seeing what it means to serve in one sense is not enough—seeing isn’t doing. But seeing in the full sense means you understand the way God is, and what He will accomplish through your service. This is what Jesus did when, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame (Heb. 12:2).