

Making Disciples Who Make Disciples

Ministry year 2021-2022

Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series

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TEXT: Matthew 20:20-28



We turn our attention to God's Word this morning. En route to God's Word, I want to remind you of a few significant people:



The first is Sargon II, who ruled the kingdom of Akkad. He's identified as the first person in recorded history to rule over an empire.

Alexander of Macedon, by the age of 30, had created one of the largest empires in history, stretching all the way from Greece to India. He was undefeated in battle and widely considered one of the most successful military commanders.



Mohammed Ali, a professional boxer from Louisville, Kentucky, fought in several historic boxing matches, including the highly publicized fights with Sonny Liston and Joe Frazier, the Fight of the Century, which was the biggest boxing event up until that moment. He boxed in the Thrilla in Manila and the Rumble in the Jungle against George Foreman. He was named Sportsman of the Century by *Sports Illustrated* and Sports Personality of the Century by the BBC.



Antiochus III restored the territory of the Seleucid Empire and fought a war against the Roman Empire. He declared himself the "champion of Greek freedom against Roman domination."





Pompey, a leading Roman general, served as commander in the Third Servile War and the Third Mithridatic War, and he celebrated three Roman triumphs. His successes were hailed in his generation, but his adversaries gave him the nickname of the “Teenage Butcher” for his ruthlessness.

Wayne Gretzky, a professional hockey player, played 20 seasons in the NHL. He's a leading goal scorer, the leading assist producer, and the leading point scorer in NHL history. He has more assists in his career than any other player has points scored. His rookie card just sold for \$3.75 million.



Cyrus of Persia led the largest empire the world had yet seen, from the Mediterranean to the Indus River.

Catherine of Russia was Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796, the country's longest ruling female leader. Under her long reign, with ideas from the Enlightenment, Russia experienced a renaissance of culture and science, new cities, universities and theaters. Many people moved from Europe to Russia during her reign.



Tom Brady holds every major quarterback record: passing yards, completions, touchdown passes, games started, most Pro Bowl selections. Never having a losing season, he is the NFL leader in career quarterback wins, quarterback regular-season wins, quarterback playoff wins, and Super Bowl MVPs.

What do all these people have in common? All of them share the attribute “great”: Catherine the Great, Cyrus the Great, Antiochus III the Great, Sargon the Great, and Wayne Gretzky is simply called the Great One. They were all called “great,” and we long for greatness. It’s in us; we long for it.

In our text this morning, we have Jesus' answer to the question of greatness. What is greatness? Where is it found? How can it be obtained? Jesus’ teaching, which comes to us deep in our discipleship series, is so challenging. It's so disruptive, actually. It re-calibrates our ambitions. It causes us to reimagine everything we've really thought about greatness. This passage, if you allow it to enter, is going reorder everything inside of you. If you allow this passage, this piece of Jesus’ teaching, to actually come into your heart, into your mind, you

might leave here, and people who know you well would say, "I don't even recognize you." Are we willing to let it come in? It's safe to stay with the aspirations of these nine "greats." These are familiar paths. But this teaching of Jesus will remake us.

Our text starts with a question from a mother, the mother in particular of the sons of Zebedee. She comes up to Jesus with her sons and kneels before Him, and she asks Jesus for something. Jesus turns to her, and in Matthew 20:21 He says:

"What do you want?"

"What can I do for you?" She then says to Jesus:

"Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your kingdom."

"Here they are. Aren't they handsome? Aren't they capable? Haven't I done a good job raising them? Just speak the word and have one of them sit at Your right hand and one of them sit at Your left. That's all I want." Now most mothers want good things for their kids. They want them to go to good schools, find a godly spouse, be successful, remember all of our love, care and attention, service and sacrifice when they were little, so that can be reciprocated when we need it the most. But notice her confidence in the power of Jesus to speak the word. "You say it, Jesus, and it will be done. Speak the word: my boys, one at Your right, one at Your left. That's all I want." It's a mother's request for positions of honor and power and prestige, and Jesus turns in Matthew 20:22 and addresses the boys. This is not clear in the English translation. In the English translation you could see the word "you" and think that Jesus is talking to the mother. But the text is in the second person plural, so He actually has heard that the real request behind mom's request is fueled by the sons. Mom comes forward and says, "Jesus, speak the word," and Jesus says, "Guys, I'm talking to you." It's very clear.

Just to remind you, these are the brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee. Jesus gave them a nickname in the Gospels. He called them, in the Greek transliteration, *Boanerges*, which is the Hebrew *bene reghesh*, which means "Sons of Thunder," and that's not a NASCAR brand. Some other scholars think this could be *bene regez*, which is "Sons of Wrath," but either way, these guys are hot temperamentally. They are ambitious. Just for a window into the moment of their intensity, when Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem, He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they entered a village of the Samaritans. Remember, we just talked about the cultural conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus sent messengers ahead to enter the Samaritan village and make preparations for Him to visit. The people did not receive those messengers. Jesus' face was set toward Jerusalem, and when the disciples James and John saw that people didn't warmly welcome Jesus, they said to Jesus, "*Lord, do You want us to call down fire on those people?*" Wow. Have you ever thought that? Out of zeal for Jesus, "Lord, would You like me just

to incinerate those people who are not responding?" I think if we're honest, that's closer than we would like to admit. These guys are hot, temperamental, and Jesus gives them an unflattering nickname. Jesus gives out nicknames to others that are complimentary. To Peter, "You are the rock, and I will build My church upon this great confession." But these brothers have a nickname that signals their ambition and their hot headedness.

In Matthew 20:22, we read that Jesus speaks to them. He says:

"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"

Because the Sons of Thunder, like many of us, are usually confident, they don't even hesitate. They respond: *"We are able."* Jesus is talking about the cup, by the way, that He will be holding in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is the cup of wrath against the sin of the world. Jesus is saying, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you willing to lay your lives down for the sin of the world?" "Oh, yeah, we can do that." No hesitation. Then Jesus says to them in Matthew 20:23:

"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."

"You will drink my cup" proves to be both a prophetic prediction and also hope for growth. With their confident assertion, "We can do this, whatever you need," Jesus knows they will be growing, and in that growth there's hope for all of us. There is also a prophetic prediction.

How are you feeling? How are you feeling about these two guys? When the rest of us come into view in the passage, it turns out that we're not saying, "Guys, that's not the Jesus way." When we come into view in this passage in Matthew 20:24, the ten heard about this conversation—the request for greatness, the seats of honor, power and prestige—and they were upset. The disciples were ticked off, not at the request or the nature of the request. I think they were ticked off because Jesus just might grant their request. We all wonder: "Are they the greatest?"

Have you ever been in a moment like that? Everyone's upset, and Jesus calls everyone. Jesus quiets down the argument that is boiling over. He calls everyone to Himself, and these three verses that follow are some of the most important in all the teaching of Jesus. Jesus calls everyone to Him, and He says to them and to us in Matthew 20:25:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them."

"Gentiles" is just the Latin translation of "nations." Both of these verbs in this verse have an emphatic preposition added, so it is a very negative term. "To domineer" would be a better

translation or “to lead in an authoritarian manner”—aggressive, subjugating, beating down.

Have you ever been in an environment like that? Most of us have experienced that. We've experienced that sometimes in the workplace, where the boss gets all the credit and takes none of the blame, where the boss has more vacation than anyone else, makes more than everyone else, sometimes combined, and deep down we feel like that's not right. Sometimes we feel this in an academic setting, where the department chair is so domineering with his or her views on a particular topic that there is really no academic freedom at all. Sometimes we experience this in national life or international life, where we see models of leadership where aggression is identified as implicitly virtuous, and deep down it makes us feel unsafe. Do you have my interest in view, we wonder? Leadership models that are domineering and authoritarian make it really difficult to work with or work for.

And Jesus says, “You know this,” and the disciples had seen it. They had seen it in local leaders in Judea. They had seen it in Herod, who was another who was called “the Great.” They had seen it in Herod's sons. They had seen it in Roman governors. They had seen it all around them—this model of leadership. This model of leadership has a fountainhead, if you will, in people like Julius Caesar: “I make decisions alone.” It's someone who says, “I'm the only one you can trust.” When Julius Caesar was kidnapped as a young man, he was kidnapped by pirates who held him for ransom. When they said, “We've kidnapped you, and we are going to charge a ransom for your release,” his response to that was, “You don't know who you have. Your ransom price is way too low.” He said, “Let me tell you who you kidnapped, and you need to jack up that ransom price. My friends are going to pay it. I'll be released, and then I'm going to come back and kill all of you.” That's what he said. And, actually, that's what he did. His friends paid for his release. He was released, and then he came back and killed them all.

In the Roman world of the first century, around the world of Jesus, that is virtuous and powerful. The disciples had seen it. You have seen this type of leadership: domineering, authoritarian. Then Jesus looks at all of us, and He says in Matthew 20:26:

“It shall not be so among you.”

“My leadership, My kingdom is built on a completely different model of greatness.” At first it seems so foreign and so strange that, when we hear teaching that doesn't fit anything we've known, we are tempted initially to reject it. Jesus says, “Not so, not so among you.” He continues, and in Matthew 20:26-27, we read:

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.”

If you want to be first, then think last. If you want to be great, take the posture of a lowly

servant. If you want to be first, then you must be the slave of all. As Jesus speaks these words, it re-orders our sense of ambition, and our sense of self-protection rises up, and the thought comes to us, "Well, maybe Jesus is just saying that about us but not really about Him." Jesus solves that with the last verse of our passage. Jesus says that He leads by example. He doesn't leave us to wonder, "Did He really mean that?" He doesn't leave us to wonder, "Is that true for us but not of Him?" No. In Matthew 20:28, we read that Jesus says:

"Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Jesus, the Lord of glory, the Son of Man, echoed that great text in Daniel 7, where we see Jesus in glory. Daniel sees Jesus, this glorious Son of Man, come to the Father, and the glad obedience of all nations is given to Him. He is given an everlasting kingdom and glory and power, and with all that power and all that glory, Jesus shows the real expression of power, and that is to serve, not to be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many. As the price to rescue, Jesus comes to serve and to give His life as a sacrifice, and in so doing, He reveals greatness. And He not only reveals greatness, but He recalibrates greatness for all of us and expects us to live and love and lead and serve on this trajectory. It's the real expression of power. It's the real expression of leadership, and it's the real expression of God. It's the real expression of the character and identity of God.

In Isaiah 66:1-2, we read:

"Thus says the LORD: 'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool; what is the house that you would build for Me, and what is the place of My rest? All these things My hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My Word.'"

The God of glory and of greatness, He notices the humble man, the contrite spirit, which is a sorrow for our sinfulness, and the one who trembles at His Word.

In Jeremiah 9:23-24, we read:

"Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight,' declares the LORD."

In Micah 6:8, we read:

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do

justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Jesus' teaching points us in a way of living, in a demonstration of power that reflects the real character of God.

Where does Jesus' teaching go? Let's follow it forward. Jesus says this extraordinary thing to the disciples. The Sons of Thunder, I imagine, are silent for a minute. The mother—how is she feeling right now? We don't have the side conversation. Maybe she came back to them and said, "I knew I shouldn't have asked Jesus that. Why did you tell me to ask Jesus that?" We don't have any that. We're not totally sure. But let's follow where Jesus' extraordinary teaching goes.

First, where does it go for Jesus? Is this just theoretical? No, not at all. Jesus is on His way to Holy Week. Matthew 20 is some of His final teaching before Jesus enters Holy Week that climaxes with His death on the cross and resurrection. Paul describes this poetically in Philippians 2:3-10, when he says:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

That's where Jesus' teaching goes for Him. He obeys His own teaching.

Where does it go for the mother? The mother of the sons of Zebedee actually also goes to the cross. She receives Jesus' teaching. She takes it in, and she follows Jesus to the cross. Matthew 27 tells us that, as Jesus was on the cross, there were many women there looking on: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. She followed Jesus to the cross. Matthew doesn't tell us her name, but Mark does. Mark tells us that there were women looking on from a distance: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger, and Salome. Salome, the mother of James and John, heard Jesus' teaching and she stayed with it. This is powerfully instructive for us, Beloved, because Jesus will teach us things that, at the moment, stand in contradiction to everything we know, and our first instinct

will be that that can't be right. Disciples, though, remember they learn to obey Jesus over time, and Salome stays with Jesus and follows Him all the way to the cross. Salome is there in Mark 16. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to the tomb of Jesus, and she is there as a witness of His resurrection.

Where does it go for the sons? Where does this teaching go for them? James, son of Zebedee, is the first of the twelve to be killed. In Acts 12, Herod (this is Herod Agrippa) lays violent hands on the church leadership, and he kills James with a sword. His death with the sword is instructive for us because people who die by the sword are Roman citizens. Slave peoples are crucified. When Jesus said, *"Are you able to drink the cup of suffering?"* He also said, *"You will."* James is the first one, but he dies as a church leader, and he's the first of the Twelve to give his life. He's the first to die.

John, his brother, is the last of the apostles to die. He lives to old age. Early church tradition says that he lived to close to 100 years old. He served in Jerusalem, and when the Roman army besieged Jerusalem, he left Jerusalem and ministered in Ephesus. When the Roman emperor attacked the church in the region of Ephesus, he sent John to exile on the Island of Patmos. One early church tradition says that John suffered greatly and was forced to do manual labor on the island. Other early tradition says at one point that he was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil. But he lived to be 100. This Son of Thunder, when we read his Gospel and we read his letters, we see that one of the most frequent words he uses is "love." This man was changed by the teaching of Jesus. He let Jesus' teaching come in and reorder his affections. This man, who at the moment of our text was ready to call down fire, ended up saying, *"Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends."*

Matthew 20:26-28:

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant; whoever would be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Greatness, according to Jesus, is service: the mindset and status of a slave, which He Himself took, and the living out of that as a willing sacrifice for the good of others. This is so revolutionary.

Now I know that you're like me in this way. We all have this in us: the desire to see greatness. We celebrate military accomplishments, political accomplishments, sports accomplishments. We want to see greatness, and deep down we want to hear, "You've done well. You've done a great job." Jesus knows that, and Jesus says in Matthew 5:19:

“Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

“Whoever does My commandments and teaches them will be called great.” Greatness in the kingdom is just learning the way of Jesus and doing it. That means for disciples, for all of us, that we cannot be domineering or authoritarian in our leadership style. It’s just excluded; it’s not to do just a little bit of that. Jesus says, “I don’t want any of that. That’s not how I lead.” It means that we must find these three words sweet to our innermost being: servant, slave, sacrifice. Those must be words that make us think of Jesus. It means we must embody the mindset and effective practice of servant leadership.

Sometimes people echo the teachings of Jesus without even knowing it, and one of the leadership writers and speakers I enjoy hearing is Simon Sinek. I don’t think he would attribute this to Jesus, but he notes that there is an entire section in the bookshop called “Self-help.” Have you noticed that section? It’s a big section. But there is no section called “Help Others.” He says:

“Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in our charge. Leaders are the ones who willingly give up something of their own: their time, their energy, their money, and maybe even the food off their plate. When it matters, leaders eat last.

He goes on to say:

“If our leaders are to enjoy the trappings of their position in the hierarchy, then we expect them to offer us protection. The problem is, for many of the overpaid leaders, we know that they took the money and perks and didn’t offer protection to their people. In some cases, they even sacrificed their people to protect or boost their own interests. This is what so viscerally offends us. We only accuse them of greed and excess when we feel they have violated the very definition of what it means to be a leader.”

We sense that. And then He says:

“Leadership is not a license to do less; it is a responsibility to do more.”

Matthew 20:26-28 tells us:

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. Whoever would be first among you must be your slave. And just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

What would happen if we as a community of people, learning to obey Jesus over time, started

to live that way? What would happen in our church? What would happen in our city? How much would the Kingdom of God grow here? Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, You are clear in Your teaching, and Your teaching is challenging. Lord, we ask for forgiveness in Your presence for honoring a vision of greatness that is antithetical to You. Lord, forgive us. Forgive us for falling in love with the wrong things and neglecting the most important. Forgive us, Lord, when we have been given the opportunity to lead, and we've used it and exercised it in a way that hurt the people around us, where we were domineering or authoritarian, where without even realizing it, we reached for paganism, and we bypassed the cross. Forgive us, Lord. Lord Jesus, write Your Word on our hearts right now. We want to receive it. Let Your Word rework our ambitions, recalibrate how we understand greatness, and motivate and empower our service. Lord, we hear You. Whoever would be great must be Your servant. Whoever would be first must be Your slave. And we see You living it out, coming not to be served but to serve and to give Your life for us. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for ransoming us and rescuing us from our failures. Hallelujah! Lord, we ask now for more of You in us. Take all that we are, all that we have, and make us more like You.

In Jesus' Name, we pray, Amen.