

Great in the Kingdom
Matthew 7, 18, 20, 23; Luke 22

Turn to Matthew 7 please. The twelve disciples of Jesus had some sort of a running battle going on between them about which of them was the greatest. This did not start until after they had been sent out to preach and heal and cast out demons, and after they realized that Jesus was the Christ. But pretty soon after that, they have regular discussions about this. Like arguments.

Jesus did not mind that they wanted to be great in the kingdom. He could work with that. But in every case, they completely misunderstood kingdom greatness, and Jesus aimed them in the right direction again.

We will look at five texts today, four in Matthew and one in Luke. And we are asking the same question: what does Jesus tell us about being great in the kingdom? We probably don't think about it that way, so let's say it this way: what does God most want to see in us? What does God value in his children? What did Jesus say will make us great in the kingdom? Worth knowing.

1, What Greatness is Not - Matt 7:21

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

For Jesus, a prophet was someone who spoke God's message. Jesus said John the Baptist was a prophet, and Jesus called himself a prophet. "A prophet has no honour in his home town" he said, talking about himself. When Jesus sent the 12 out, they had the same message as John and Jesus: "the kingdom of heaven has arrived." (See also Mt 10:31 and 23:34.)

My point is that when Jesus sent the twelve out in Matthew 10, they were acting as prophets, and their preaching was prophesying, because they were speaking God's message. The twelve prophesied in the name of Jesus, they drove out demons in the name of Jesus, and they performed many miracles in the name of Jesus. Jesus warns those who did what the twelve did.

Now we're going to read that warning again, and you picture people who did exactly what the twelve did having this conversation with Jesus on the final judgement day.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

I don't know if it is even possible to do all that in the name of Jesus and not enter into life. But we are asking, what makes someone great in the kingdom, and we sure find out here what it is not. Preaching the gospel in the name of Jesus, spiritual warfare in the name of Jesus, many miracles in the name of Jesus – great in the kingdom is not that, not even close.

Jesus did send the 12 out to preach and do miracles, that was his will. But the essential will of the Father is something very different than what the twelve did on their mission. That was not yet the Father's essential will. Powerful ministry in the name of Jesus is not what the Father seeks. That much Jesus makes real clear here. We know what greatness is not.

2, Unless you Disciples Change, You Won't Even Enter the Kingdom – Matt 18:1-4

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Mark and Luke both give us information that Matthew left out: the disciples had been arguing about this among themselves for a while before Jesus got involved (Mk 9, Lk 9).

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

We don't know what the disciples thought would make them great in the kingdom, but Jesus did, and we can figure some of it out. The apostles' ideas about being great in the kingdom are so bad that if they do not change, they will not even enter the kingdom! Their thinking about greatness is not just wrong, it is disastrous.

This is why the "Lord, Lord" warning in Matt 7 sounds like something the disciples needed to hear. Those "Lord, Lord" people did not enter, and if the twelve don't change, they won't enter.

Their society was very concerned about honour and position. We want to be happy and rich, they wanted honour and position. They weren't big on equality. "If you don't have to give me honour, then I have to give you honour, and I sure don't want that." And age was one of the things that got you honour, so children had none.

The thing about children is that they had no position and no honour, and everyone knew it. Children are not innocent, and they are not more trusting, either. A child's faith is the faith of someone who's helpless, someone who can't make anyone else serve them. Childlike faith is the faith of the helpless and powerless.

And whatever the disciples thought greatness was, it was not what Jesus said. Then Jesus talked to the disciples about unimportant believers, the believers who don't count very much. Woe to anyone who causes little believers to stumble in their faith, woe to anyone who despises the little believers (18:6, 10).

The disciples were aiming up, trying to climb on each other's heads, and Jesus aimed them down. Take a lowly position, and take good care of the little ones who believe. That's greatness.

3, Your Servant, Your Slave - Matt 20:25-28

In Matthew 20, we read that the brothers James and John asked to sit on Jesus' right and left in his kingdom. James and John were clearly hoping to get ahead of the other ten disciples, they wanted the most honourable positions. The other ten heard this, and of course were indignant.

When we read that the disciples were arguing about who was greatest, this will be how the discussions went. Relationships within the twelve must have been pretty rocky sometimes.

Jesus called the twelve 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 among you 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.

Here's the line to notice: *Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave.*

Whose servant will the great one be? The servant of the other eleven. Whose slave will the first one be? The slave of the other eleven. *Whoever wants to become great among you must be **your** servant, and whoever wants to be first among must be **your** slave.*

We can get this wrong in one of two ways. (1) We can think that God really wants is in my private life with him, private successes and failures. Or (2), we can think what matters most to God is my work out there in the world. Our private lives do matter, our work in the world matters, for sure, but our service to each other is front and center in kingdom greatness.

Even for the twelve, what mattered most was how they treated one another, and if they would be servants and slaves to one another. When God looks for greatness, that's where he looks.

4, The Greatest Among you will be Your Servant - Matt 23:8-12

In this paragraph Jesus will be talking to the twelve as well as the larger group of his Galilean followers. Jesus was explaining how life in church relationships would be different than elsewhere.

But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest

among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The greatest among you will be your servant. It is not humble service in the world that matters most, it is humble service to one another. There is surely a place for humble service in the world, but we must let Jesus have his say here, and he's consistent.

What makes us the salt of the earth and the light of the world is how we live together, my brothers and sisters. This is why unity among us is such steady work, and why there are so many ways to avoid it. Kingdom greatness is perhaps not what we thought.

I am Among You as One who Serves - Luke 22:24-27

The disciples could not leave this greatness alone. Matthew and Mark don't tell us this story, but Luke does. This is now after the Last Supper, after Jesus has said, "this bread is my body, do this in memory of me," and "this cup is the new covenant in my blood."

Jesus and the disciples are still in the Passover meal room, the kind of conversation that happens when the meal is about over. There again, the disciples argue with one another about greatest in the kingdom. And one more time, Jesus teaches them the same things.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Picture this, people: *For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.* These 13 men are eating a meal. Jesus says the one at the table is greater, but he's among them as one who serves.

Jesus can't be sitting at the table when he says this. He's got to be walking around, bringing more bread, or pouring water, or picking up plates, something like that, taking care of the 12. In John's Gospel, he washes their feet at this meal, so maybe that's what is happening.

Here's the thing: when he explains real greatness, he talks about serving them. He could have said, "I am in the world as one who serves." It would have been true. But he does not say that, because real greatness lies in a different direction. *I am among you as one who serves.*

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever among you wants to be first must be your slave. The greatest among you will be your servant. I am among you as one who serves.

No Guilt Please

I hope no one feels guilty about not serving the church more. Please just throw that out, it is not from me or the Lord. We all have our own life situations, and Paul is entirely clear in 1 Cor 7 that our individual life situations are our calling from God, we are called to be faithful there.

Some situations don't leave much room for serving the church, at least not in the common ways. That's fine. That's God's doing. But it is still good for us to know what the Lord said about kingdom greatness, and to know the essential will of the Father for all of us. Every life situation includes some choices, and our Lord wants us to know what he values.

Unity Among Differences

How to respond to govt health regulations, and to covid vaccination is the most powerful dividing force I have seen in 31 years of pastoring. People on both sides understand that God supports them. But in the mean time, how we all humbly serve one another and care for one another is the unquestionable priority of our Lord Jesus.

Paul teaches about differences like this in the church. At the end of that discussion he says, "*So then accept one another, and so bring praise to God.*" So that is what we will do. We'll accept one another, and in that way bring praise to God. We've been doing well, but things are still warming up, so let's stay vigilant.

Covenant of Membership

We plan our covenant for the first Sunday of November. Our Lord's teaching about kingdom greatness is exactly why we have a covenant of membership in the first place. We're trying to bring the Lord's call into our lives together. That covenant is another reminder to live this out. So let's aim this way toward each other. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for being clear. Thank you for teaching us, not leaving us in the dark about what matters most to you. Thank you for your patience with the twelve. We take hope from that, because it means you'll be patient with us as well. Help us in these difficult days to be as gracious with each other as you are with us, to serve each other as you served us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.