

Great in the Kingdom: Serve One Another

Matthew 7, 18, 20, 23; Luke 22

Turn to Matthew 7. Today we'll read about a problem that the disciples had, and what Jesus did about it. The twelve disciples of Jesus had a running battle going on between them about which was the greatest. Once they'd been sent out to preach and heal, once they'd experienced successful ministry, and once they knew that Jesus was the Christ, they could taste glory for themselves. They argued about which of them would have the most honour. They were argued about the pecking order within the twelve, they kept trying to get ahead of each other.

We might not have that problem, but we need to see how Jesus handled this, and we need to learn what he taught them. Jesus knew they wanted to be great in the kingdom, and that was good. He could work with wanting to be great. But they completely misunderstood kingdom greatness. They were way off track. Jesus kept correcting them, kept pointing them in the right direction.

We will look at five texts, four in Matthew and one in Luke. We ask: what does Jesus tell us about being great in the kingdom? What does God most want to see in us? What does God prize the most in his children? What will make us great? But first we need to talk about God's will.

Background – The Will of God for our Lives

In Matthew 7, Jesus talks about doing the Father's will, and we need to clear up something. In my circles, the will of God means what God wants in my private decisions. Who does God want me to marry? Where does God want me to live? Does God want me to accept this offer?

When the Bible talks about doing God's will, it usually talks about the things he calls all of us to do, his will that's the same for everyone. Here are a few examples: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you" (1 Thess 5). "It is God's will that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thess 4). "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people" (1 Peter 2).

We each have unique assignments from God, but in the NT that's usually God's "call," not God's "will." I'm sure there are exceptions, but it's usually that way. So when Jesus talks about doing the Father's will, he means doing the same basic things that God expects all his children to do.

Now to Matthew 7:21. In this warning Jesus tells us what kingdom greatness is not.

What Greatness is Not - Matt 7:21–23

"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!’

Jesus said these self-deceived prophets will be surprised that final judgement goes against them. They thought they would enter the kingdom because they had two things going for them. One, they were devoted to Jesus. They call him “Lord, Lord.” They mean it. Everything they do is in his name. Two, they have powerful ministries in the world. They speak God’s message, they perform miracles, and they cast out demons. Surely they would enter!

Jesus did not argue with either one of these. “Yes, you believe you are devoted to me, and yes, you have powerful ministries in the world. But, you did not do the Father’s will.” This is the second last warning in the Sermon. In the last warning, the foolish builder heard the words of Jesus but did not do them, and the wise builder heard the words of Jesus and did what Jesus said. Doing the Father’s will, and doing what Jesus said will be the same thing, and they’ll be what Jesus has already taught in the Sermon.

Jesus said, “blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart (those who don’t pretend), blessed are those who make peace with their enemies, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *this* kind of righteousness.” Beatitude people: that’s the Father’s will, that’s hearing what Jesus said and doing it. These great ministers did a lot of wonderful things out there, all in Jesus’ name. But they didn’t get near the beatitudes, and they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said this will happen to “many.”

The reason I begin with this “Lord, Lord” warning is that it describes the twelve exactly. They are devoted to Jesus, and three chapters later Jesus will send them out to do the very things these unfortunate prophets do: Jesus sends the twelve to speak God’s message, to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out the demons” (Matt 10:7–8). With this warning Jesus was hoping to prevent the disciples from getting into trouble, but they got into trouble anyway.

If You Don’t Change, You Won’t Even Enter – Matt 18:1–6

The disciples came to Jesus and asked him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Mark and Luke both give us information that Matthew omits: the disciples had been arguing about this among themselves before Jesus got involved (Mark 9, Luke 9).

At that time 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. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

When they asked Jesus who would be greatest, he said, “Unless you twelve change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Not even enter? That bites! He said this to apostles who had preached and performed miracles. Their 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 is not just wrong, it is disastrous.

The “Lord, Lord” warning in Matthew 7, and this warning to the disciples in Matthew 18, are the only two places in Matthew that Jesus speaks of “not entering the kingdom of heaven”

Some cultural background will help. Their society focused on honour and position. They weren’t big on equality in those days; a person either had more honour than the next person, or owed the next one honour. Their society worked more like this: “If you don’t have to give me honour, then I have to give you honour, and I sure don’t want that.”

Age was one of the things that brought honour. Children had no position and no honour, and everyone knew it. Jesus wasn’t saying children were pure and innocent. They were helpless. A child’s faith is the faith of someone who cannot make anyone else serve them. Childlike faith is the faith of the powerless, blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek. Powerless is just what the disciples did not want.

Then Jesus said, “Woe to anyone who causes any little believers to stumble, woe to anyone who despises them (Matt 18:6, 10). “Little believers” includes children, and also includes anyone in the community of believers that’s easy to ignore, anyone that does not get noticed. To the twelve Jesus said, “you want to be great in the kingdom? You take real good care of them.” In Matthew 10:42 Jesus speaks in the same way about “any of these little ones who are my disciples.”

The disciples were devoted to Jesus, and had experienced powerful ministry in the world. But the relationships within the twelve were bad, and if they did not change that they would not even enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus told them, “Never mind who gives you honour. You give honour to the believers that don’t count, to the disciples no one notices. You leave no one out.”

Detour on “the least of these my brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40).

In Matthew 25, Jesus ends his public teaching with a picture of final judgement, dividing the righteous from the unrighteous. The righteous are those who took care of needy people. “Inasmuch as you did it for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.” That’s what the King says to those who will enter eternal life.

The question: who are the Lord’s brothers and sisters? Every preacher I’ve heard assumed that every needy person in the world was the Lord’s brother or sister, and that is just plain wrong. In Matthew 10, Jesus speaks of “these little ones who are my disciples.” In Matthew 18 Jesus speaks of “these little ones who believe in me.” In Matthew 12, Jesus looked around at his followers and said that his own brothers and sisters were whoever does the Father’s will.

So the least of these my brothers and sisters in Matthew 25 are little believers, little disciples. The book of Acts and the New Testament Letters show us that this was always how New Testament churches understood Jesus. But I've never heard a preacher say the least of these my brothers and sisters are needy believers. Don't be fooled by that. In the family of God, it's important that no one in the family gets left out. Detour is over.

The Great One will be Your Servant, Your Slave - Matthew 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 hoping to get ahead of the other ten disciples. They wanted more honour. The other ten heard this, and of course were indignant. "Who do they think they are?" Relationships within the twelve were rocky sometimes.

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."

We must not miss this: whose servant exactly will the great apostle be? The servant of the other eleven. Whose slave will the greatest apostle 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 you* must be *your* slave." What mattered most for the twelve was how they treated one another, and if they would be servants and slaves to one another. The twelve powerful ministers spent a lot of time together, so that's where their kingdom greatness would be most evident. When God looks for greatness, that's where he looks. Face it, people, our views of spiritual greatness are not like this.

I was preaching this once at a conference, and in the question time afterward I was getting a hard time from those who thought outreach was the main business of the church. I've had quite a bit of that, and usually I say something like "let's read this text again."

This one time, a long-time missions director spoke up and said, "career missionaries leave the field for two reasons. One, health problems; and two, they don't get along with other missionaries." He said, "We need to hear this." They don't get along with other missionaries. They don't talk about that. The apostles needed to hear this, and we need this: serve each other.

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

This occurs during Jesus' final days in Jerusalem. Jesus teaches the larger group of his Galilean followers the same thing as the twelve. He explains how their relationships would be different.

"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.”

Who is greatest? “The greatest among you will be your servant.” This is what the Lord said when James and John wanted the best places. It is not humble service in the world that matters most, but humble service to one another. We also have humble serving lives in the world, there is no getting away from that. But when it comes to the priority, we must let Jesus have his say. Greatness is not out there, it’s in here: the one who serves the rest of the followers.

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

The disciples could not leave this competition alone. Matthew and Mark don’t tell us this story, but Luke does. And get this, people: this story happened after the Last Supper. After they had the Passover together, still all together in the upper room, “a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.” So one more time, Jesus taught them.

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.

The reason we hear about this problem again and again is not just to make the disciples look bad and Jesus look patient, although these stories do that. We hear this again and again because God’s Spirit is being as clear as possible to us about what real greatness looks like, because we need this, because God’s Spirit knows very well that we want honour and power as much as the apostles, and because we are as slow to learn this as they were. Does the Lord not have great patience?

Jesus said, “*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 at a real meal, they are all eating together. The Last Supper seems to be winding down. Jesus tells them that normally the one at the table is greater, but that he is among them as one who serves.

Jesus cannot be sitting down when he says, “I am among you as one who serves.” He has to be up and serving, walking around, bringing more bread or pouring water or picking up plates. He is taking care of the 12, doing servant duties, while they dispute about which of them is greatest. Imagine! In John’s Gospel, Jesus washed their feet at this meal – maybe that has already happened. In any case, they are at the table arguing about greatness and he is up and about, serving them.

When Jesus explained real greatness, he talked about how he actually served them. He could have said, “I am in the world as one who serves,” but he didn’t say that, because kingdom greatness lies elsewhere. “I am among you as one who serves.” That’s how the Lord corrected their greatness dispute.

What got the disciples in trouble was competing about who was a greater servant in the world, preaching and doing miracles and performing exorcisms. To correct their thinking and line them up with the kingdom, he called them to be table waiters for each other, and wash each other’s feet.

Summary

People have great personal loyalty to Jesus the Lord. That is good and important, but not yet the first priority. People get called to powerful ministry in the world and carry it out faithfully, and that also is good. But it is not yet the priority. The disciples had all that, and Jesus told them that if they did not humble themselves, they would not even enter the kingdom.

“Whoever among you wants to become great 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.” What makes us great, what makes us the salt of the earth and the light of the world, what makes us a city on a hill and brings glory to the Father, is how we live together as brothers and sisters, and how we serve each other.

People, you do lots of this a lot of the time. Your lives show that this is not new to you. I say these things again because we’ll have covenant of membership in a few weeks, and we need to remind each other why we do that. Let’s not grow weary of doing good to one another.

Let’s take one more look at the relationships in these stories. The twelve are not at peace with each other, that’s pretty clear, and it goes on for quite a while. Jesus knows what the problem is, and he knows it is a serious problem. It does not fit with God’s kingdom at all. Jesus corrects them again and again. The disciples don’t get it. The Lord’s correction does not seem to help. The Lord never softens his call, he never lowers his standard. On the other hand he’s patient with them, he does not trade them in for better followers but sticks with them, keeps correcting them. He’s patient and persistent. And they do stick with him. It’s still a lot like that, isn’t it? Amen.

PRAYER: Father, have mercy on the ways in which we’re selfish and self-centered. On the other hand, thank you for all the times your Spirit pulls us out of that, and leads us to be good to one another. O God, please do that more and more. Show your mercy by leading us into this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us all 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.