

FOLLOWING THE KING — SERMON 7

The King's Way: Greatness Redefined

Matthew 20:20–28 (NKJV) - 20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you 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?" They said to Him, "We are able." 23 So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. 25 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. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be

served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

INTRODUCTION — When Ambition Meets the Cross

Have you ever had a moment in life when what you wanted collided with what God willed? That is exactly what happens here. Jesus has just told His disciples He is going to Jerusalem, not for a coronation, but for a crucifixion. The air is heavy with destiny. The shadow of the cross stretches across the road. **And into that moment steps a mother with a dream. She kneels before Him, but her request is for a throne. “Lord,” she says, “grant that my sons may sit, one on Your right hand, and one on Your left, in Your Kingdom.”**

She means well. She loves her boys. She believes in Jesus. But her timing is tragic. **Heaven is preparing a sacrifice, and she is asking for status.**

Can you feel the tension?

- Jesus is talking about a cup — she is talking about a crown.
- He is preparing to lay down His life — she is asking how to get ahead in the Kingdom.

It is one of the most human moments in all of Scripture, and one of the most revealing. Because every one of us

has lived there, in that place where worship meets ambition, where love for Jesus wrestles with the desire to be noticed, used, elevated, or remembered. And right here, Jesus looks through time and speaks to every disciple who has ever dreamed of doing something great for God and He says, **“You do not know what you ask.”**

Then He redefines greatness forever:

- He teaches us that in His Kingdom, the way up is down.
- That the path to the throne runs through the towel.
- That the hands that will one day wear a crown must first carry a cross.

This is The King’s Way: Greatness Redefined. That moment, a mother’s request, a Savior’s response becomes the classroom where Jesus teaches what true greatness really is. And He begins by confronting the first obstacle to every disciple’s destiny:

POINT 1 — THE MISGUIDED AMBITION OF GREATNESS

The mother of James and John kneels in worship, but her motive stands tall. She asks for her sons to sit on the right and left - seats of honor in any royal court.

In their world, the right hand meant supreme authority, and the left meant intimate counsel. But Jesus responds, “You do not know what you ask.” They are imagining gold and crowns; He is seeing wood and nails. He says, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

The cup was a Hebrew image for one’s appointed portion — often a cup of suffering (Isaiah 51:17). The baptism was an immersion into affliction, a flood of pain. In essence, He asks, “Can you handle the cost of My calling?”

They answer quickly, “We are able.” But they do not yet realize that the path to those seats runs through crucifixion. Because when Jesus is lifted up as King, the inscription reads: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

And the right and left of His throne are already occupied - not by apostles, but by thieves. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled: "He was numbered with the transgressors." **This is the shock of divine reversal — the thrones of the Kingdom are shaped like crosses.**

- Honor in God's Kingdom is always cruciform – it takes the shape of humility, obedience, and surrender.
- **Proximity to Jesus always carries the pattern of His cross.**

The thrones of the Kingdom are carved from wood, not gold. God does not give crowns to those who refuse cups. The closer you walk with the King, the more your life will resemble the cross.

The crown you crave is always guarded by a cross you must carry. Heaven doesn't promote ambition - it purifies it until only obedience remains.

The Danger of Ambition

Ambition is a double-edged sword. It can propel a person into purpose—or poison the very soul that carries it. The danger of ambition is not in its passion, but in its direction. When our desire to *be used by God* becomes a desire to *be seen for God*, the motive has shifted from Kingdom to ego.

- **Ambition unchecked becomes idolatry dressed in ministry clothes.**
- It drives us to compete where we should collaborate, to seek platforms when God is offering process, to chase visibility when Heaven is calling for vulnerability.

Examples:

Lucifer - The Prototype of Corrupted Ambition

- **Text:** Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:17 Lucifer's fall began with the desire to "*ascend... above the stars of God.*" He wanted the throne, not the service of it.
- **Pride turned an archangel into an adversary.**
- Ambition that seeks God's position rather than His presence always breeds rebellion.

Korah - Ambition Dressed as Ministry

- **Text:** Numbers 16:1-35 = Korah was a Levite already serving in the tabernacle, but it wasn't enough. He coveted Moses' authority and Aaron's priesthood, crying, *"You take too much upon yourselves!"*
- The earth literally opened to swallow him and his followers.
- When ambition disguises itself as "spiritual equality," it usually hides resentment toward divine order.

Saul - Insecure Ambition

- 1 Samuel 15:17-28; 18:6-9 = King Saul started humble but couldn't stand to see another man celebrated. His jealousy of David's success revealed ambition rooted in insecurity.
- Ambition built on comparison leads to paranoia, not progress.
- The moment you measure greatness by applause, you lose Heaven's approval.

Absalom — The Politician of Ambition

Text: 2 Samuel 15-18 = Absalom stood at the city gate stealing the hearts of the people, saying, *“If only I were judge in the land.”*

- He used charm to mask rebellion and beauty to betray his father’s throne. His ambition hung him by his own hair in the branches of a tree.
- Ambition that manipulates people to gain position will always be caught in its own pride.

Judas Iscariot — The Disappointed Ambition

- **Text:** Matthew 26:14-16; 27:3-5 = Judas followed Jesus expecting political revolution and personal recognition. When the Kingdom didn’t look like his dream, he sold the King for thirty pieces of silver.
- Ambition rooted in self-expectation will betray the very move of God it once served.

Simon the Sorcerer — Purchased Ambition

- **Text:** Acts 8:18-23 = When Simon saw the apostles laying hands on believers, he offered them money to buy their power. Peter rebuked him: *“Your heart is not right in the sight of God.”*

- **Ambition that tries to purchase what can only be imparted will perish with the currency it values.**

Every fall in Scripture can be traced to one root - ambition unbroken by humility. The devil fell by it, leaders were devoured by it, and disciples betrayed Jesus because of it. Ambition that isn't nailed to the cross will eventually crucify the one who carries it.

Jesus wasn't condemning desire; He was crucifying self-centered drive. The cross doesn't kill vision - it kills vanity, so that what remains is pure obedience to the will of the Father.

Transition: But now Jesus turns their eyes from the cost of greatness to the contrast between His Kingdom and the world's system of power.

POINT 2 — THE MODEL OF GREATNESS JESUS FORBIDS AND COMMANDS

"The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Yet it shall not be so among you." (vv. 25–27)

When the other ten heard what James and John had asked, they were angry, not because they disagreed, but

because they wanted the same honor. So, Jesus gathered them close and exposed the spirit of competition still hidden in their hearts.

The Roman Way

- They lived under Rome's iron rule - a pyramid of power where authority flowed downward from Caesar.
- In Rome, greatness meant dominance.
- **The phrase “lord it over” (katakaryieuousin) described how Roman generals subdued provinces and crushed dissent.**
- Power was maintained through control, intimidation, and public triumph.

When Caesar conquered, the defeated were paraded through the streets chained to his chariot. The more men bowed beneath you, the greater your honor.

- Jesus says plainly, “It shall not be so among you.”
- My Kingdom will not look like Rome's empire.
- **If your greatness makes others feel smaller, it isn't Kingdom greatness - it's empire pride.**
- **The Church is not an institution of hierarchy but a fellowship of humility.**

True leaders don't demand service — they deliver it.

The Jewish Honor-Shame System

- But He also confronts Israel's own culture of pride.
- In first-century Jewish society, honor was everything.
- It determined where you sat, whom you could marry, and how you were treated in public.
- The Pharisees sought the best seats in the synagogue, long greetings in the marketplace, and titles of esteem.

To lose honor was to lose social existence - to be shamed was to be erased.

Jesus overturns it all: **"Whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant; and whoever desires to be first, let him be your slave."**

- He moves greatness from status to service, from pedigree to posture.
- He teaches that honor in Heaven is humility on earth.
- The world was obsessed with saving face; He taught the power of losing self.
- They exalted rabbis; He elevated servants.

The Meaning of the Right and Left

In every royal court, the right hand of the king represented authority; the left, intimacy and counsel.

- To sit there was to share the king's rule.
- That's what James and John desired, co-regency.

But Jesus declares that those seats belong to those who have gone low enough to carry the cross high enough.

Those places are prepared by the Father for hearts shaped like the Servant.

- The world climbs ladders: Jesus carries crosses.
- **The towel outranks the titles.**

The right hand of the King belongs to servants, not celebrities.

Transition: Having redefined what greatness is and how it's measured, Jesus now reveals how it's manifested, not in power or position, but in the daily pattern of serving.

POINT 3—THE MANIFESTATION OF GREATNESS IN THE SERVANT KING

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...”
(v. 28)

In every other kingdom, kings surround themselves with servants. But in God’s Kingdom, the King becomes the servant.

Service is His Signature - Everywhere Jesus went, He reversed the direction of greatness.

- He washed feet that would soon run away.
- He fed people who would forget Him.
- He healed those who could give Him nothing in return.
- He was not too divine to stoop; He was too divine not to.

That is the mark of our King — greatness expressed in servanthood.

The King’s power was not proven by command but by compassion.

Service is the Channel of Kingdom Power

- Every miracle He performed was an act of service.
- Feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting the broken, each was divine power flowing through humility.

- He showed that Kingdom authority isn't about domination; it's about restoration.

In His hands, power never crushes - it cleanses. And that's still how His Kingdom operates.

God doesn't anoint us to impress people; He anoints us to serve them.

The greater the anointing, the lower the posture must become. When you serve, you step into the same flow of power that moved through Jesus.

Service is the True Mark of Discipleship

In the Upper Room, He said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's."

- That wasn't ritual — it was revelation.
- He was teaching that the basin, not the badge, identifies true followers.

Service is not a ministry department; it is a Kingdom identity. When you serve, you mirror the Master.

- The closer you get to Jesus, the more you'll carry a towel.

- You cannot represent a serving King and live a self-centered life.
- Greatness is not what you achieve — it's what you give.

Service is Heaven's Definition of Success

Jesus closes with this: **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”**

- **That's not a season — it's His nature.**
- He still serves - interceding for us at the right hand of the Father, working through His Body on earth.

The Kingdom runs on service.

- At the judgment seat, the question won't be, “How many followed you?” It will be, “Whom did you serve?”
- **The towel in your hand is the evidence of the Kingdom in your heart.**
- The hands that serve on earth will rule in Heaven.

Servants change more cities than soldiers ever could.

ALTAR CALL - THE TOWEL TEST

The King is asking, “Are you willing to drink the cup and carry the towel?” Not the cup of recognition - the cup of responsibility. Not the towel of position - the towel of compassion.

- The path down is still the path up.
- The towel today becomes the crown tomorrow.
- And the only hands that will ever wear a crown are the hands that have first carried a towel.