

True greatness

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] And turn if you go to Matthew 20. Matthew chapter 20, that's page 825 in the Church Bible. Matthew chapter 20. I'm going to look at verses 17 to 34.

When it comes to greatness, there's one man that comes into my mind, and I expect it comes into many of your minds. He's the three-time heavyweight boxing champion, Cassius Clay, or we might know him as Muhammad Ali.

Do you remember him? He had five career losses, 56 wins, 37 of those were knockouts. The sports illustrators, BBC, Laureus, they needed to be named the greatest sportsman of the 20th century. What was his catchphrase? I am the greatest, wasn't it? I am the greatest, that's exactly right. He would speak about how great he was.

He would build himself up. So listen to some of his quotes. It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am. I'm not the greatest, I'm the double greatest. Not only do I knock them out, but I kick them around.

[1 : 22] His autobiography was imaginatively called the greatest in his own words. Cassius Clay was a man on a mission. A mission to be the greatest boxer in this world has ever seen.

And in Matthew 20 we come across another man on a mission. Another candidate for greatness. Like Cassius Clay, he was great.

Like Cassius Clay, he had profound things to say that people around him didn't like. But his mission could not have been more different. His closest followers identify him, this man, as the promised ruler of the world.

And they say, Jesus, you are the holder of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. You let me live. You're the one who can give entry. You are the very son of God.

And that is who his followers think he is. But this is how Jesus outlines his mission. His mission. And look at verse 18, you see. Jesus says in Matthew 20, 18.

[2 : 27] We are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man, that's his way of describing himself, will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes. And they will condemn him to death. They'll deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

And he will be raised on the third day. To see greatness for Jesus looks very, very different, doesn't it? And the Jews, his own people, they are about to condemn him to death.

Not because he did anything wrong, but because he offended them. Because he caused them problems. They're not very followers, are they? And in order to keep the peace of the Romans through the ignition of the time, they mock him, they flog him, and they will publicly execute him. They'll nail his hands and his feet to a plank of wood. They'll hoist his naked body into the air for all to see a criminal's death. And so Muhammad Ali, he punches the air.

He stands on his arms aloft. And Muhammad Ali says, I am the greatest. But the Lord Jesus allowed his arms to be nailed to the cross for us.

[3 : 41] And so let me ask you, what's your idea of greatness? What is your idea this morning of greatness? Jesus has barely finished explaining how he's going to pour out his life, how he'll be crucified, when the mother of James and John, two of his closest followers, comes up to Jesus.

She's got a sore sore on her knees. She's looking for a fever. She's dragged her two sons, slightly embarrassed, I think, with her.

And if you thought pushing pear in the sleep room was the thing of today, don't be mistaken. So here is James and John's mum coming up, saying, I want something for my sons.

Jesus says to her, what is it that you want? And she says literally this, promise me. Promise, she says.

You know, it's like when somebody asks you to promise something before they tell you what it is. That's so that you'll say yes on the spot. Promise me this. Say that.

[4 : 55] Verse 21. One of my sons, these two sons of mine, one of them is able to sit at your right hand, and the other on your left at the kingdom. Do you remember what Jesus said he's going to do?

Remember what he said he's going to do when he gets to Jerusalem? He said, I will pour out my life. I will be crucified. But all the disciples could think of as their position in the coming kingdom. Now it's true, in the previous chapter we looked at a few weeks ago, that Jesus had told the twelve disciples they would have a special place. Chapter 19, verse 28.

Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the son of man will sit on his glorious throne, you who followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And everyone who's left, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, they'll receive a hundredfold, and they'll inherit a certain life.

[5 : 52] And the many who are first will be last, and the last first. You see, that's all they heard. The one of the disciples heard, there's something in it for them.

They are like moths, spellbound by a great light, flapping around, they're not able to see anything else. They're totally oblivious to what Jesus says about death.

All they can see is, I'm going to get some glory, and it will be awesome. And Jesus is saying, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. And he is living it out, isn't he?

That Jesus is about to pour out his life. He's about to become the last. So that others can become the first. But all the apostles are doing, is they are worrying that they get the first place.

They've completely misunderstood the mission of Jesus. You don't know what you're asking Jesus as to the Lord. Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink?

[6 : 59] So the disciples, they think, don't they, that glory and greatness come from political positions. From kind of worldly power, and conquest, and lofty schemes.

That's what's in their minds. Ruling and reigning. That's what is in their minds about what Jesus is going to do, despite what he said.

But the cup that Jesus is speaking of in this passage, it's not the kind of, the royal silverware. It's not the royal doulton that you have in a special box.

It's not high tea condiments that you need. When Jesus speaks about a cup here, he's using a figure of speech, an Old Testament picture. A picture of God pouring out his judgment on the world because they are in rebellion against him.

And it's a serious issue. And Jesus says, I'm about to drink that cup. I'm about to drink the cup of God's anger against what you and I have done.

[8 : 06] Against how you and I have rebelled against him and lived without a thought frame. And that drink is about to be poured out into Jesus' mouth. James and John, do you really think you're able to drink the cup from which I'm about to drink?

And ironically, the brothers say, well, we are. We are able. And they don't know what they're asking. They've got no idea. But Jesus knows, doesn't he? He knows the massiveness of what is about to go on in the next few years.

He knows that James will be the first apostle to die. He knows that King Herod will cut his throat of the sword for being a follower of Jesus.

He knows that John will live a long life, a long life of persecution and suffering, exiled to an island called Patmos. Where he has a life which is suffering for the gospel.

And so Jesus is like, doesn't he? Verse 23, if you look at this. He says, you will indeed. You will drink my cup.

[9 : 19] But to sit at my right hand and my left is not for mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it is to be prepared by the Father. Now, I want you to notice something here. Do notice, Jesus doesn't compliment our mission.

He doesn't say anything about their desire for greatness. Instead, what he does here is, he says, if you want to share in his glory, then you have to share in his suffering.

Let me say that again. If you want to share in Jesus' glory, then you need to share in his suffering. Who sits at the right hand and the left hand for Jesus is irrelevant.

He's not coming to sell box seats in his kingdom. He's coming to make his kingdom. And he does that by drinking the cup of God's anger, of God's judgment, so that you and I don't need Jesus.

By exhausting the penalty that we deserve by dying on the cross in our place. And in this long, before the other ten disciples get wind of what James and John and their man had asked, they hear that James and John are asking for the plush seats in the kingdom.

[10:37] So Matthew tells us in verse 24, when the ten heard about it, they were indignant at the two brothers. They were furious. And you think that they would be angry at James and John.

You've just not got it, boys. You've just not understood it. What the kingdom is like. But it's nothing like that at all. They are furious that they didn't get it first. They figure that they've missed out on the best tickets.

That James and John have jumped the gun and now they're going to have to settle third and fourth and fifth place. And so Jesus calls them over and he sets the record straight. And he explains how this world works.

And he says in this world rulers dominate. Men of high position they exercise power. That is how the world works, isn't it? Greatness in this world is about status.

It's about having people under you. It's about calling the shots and being able to do whatever you want. It's about being better than anybody else. whether that's in your business.

[11:47] Whether that's better than your neighbours. Whether that's better than your friends. That's what greatness is. But Jesus says not so with you.

Verse 26 it shall not be so among you. It shall not be so among you. I want us to be really careful here.

I think we need to be careful because Jesus is not saying that greatness is wrong. Greatness is not wrong. We were made to be great.

The Bible says that every human being was made in the image of God. The Bible says that every human being has been crowned with glory and honour. And we are the greatest of God's creation. for the New Testament tells us for those of us who follow Jesus that we now are seated in the heavenly realms with Jesus Christ.

[12:51] We have an inheritance that never perishes or spoils or fades and is kept in heaven for us. The Bible says to the New Testament Christians it says we will rule the world with Christ. We will judge the world.

We will share in the inheritance of God's own son. We will be called children of the creator of the universe. He will call us as sons and daughters.

And so human beings striving for greatness that there is inside of every human being and you look at our culture and it's there isn't it? That is not wrong. There's nothing wrong with greatness.

You strive for it. You don't have to be embarrassed about it. Because greatness is not the problem. The problem is how we get there. that's the issue.

I've only already wanted to follow this sermon. And this is the point. It's true greatness comes from service. True greatness comes from service. That's what Jesus showed us.

[13:57] Look at verse 26. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. must be a slave. And whoever would be first in man you must be your slave even as the son of man again that's referring to Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for money.

And Jesus takes this worldview of greatness and he just turns it on his head. He shows us that the way that we picture greatness is just the wrong way round.

So greatness in the world works like this doesn't it? We strive for greatness. It goes like that. But he says greatness in my kingdom goes the exact opposite way.

It goes down. The greatest will be the slave. Greatness is about being a servant. It's about being a slave to others. Now let's think about that for a moment.

Let's think how do men work? How do guys work? Well the way we take a lot comes down to power and status. Doesn't it? So the first question when I walk into a room full of guys the first question I ask when I meet someone I haven't seen in a while is what do you do with yourself these days?

[15:20] What are you up to now? I want to know how I fit how I compare to them. I want to know if their job is better than my job.

I want to know if they earn more money than I do. I want to know who's the greatest. I think we would struggle with this in a similar but different way.

How many times do you think to yourself do I look as fat as her? Do I look as skinny as her? Am I that short? Or what about if you've got kids?

At least our kids don't behave as badly as so and so's kids. There's so many ways we do it aren't there? So many ways that actually we don't like to repent.

We compare we build ourselves up and we say we aren't great. You want to be great says Jesus? Be a slave. Be a slave.

[16:27] Such sharp language. It's so you can get through the disciples thick skulls and you can get it through my thick skull. And there's no romance is there?

There's no prestige. There's no power in being a slave. You've not got control of it. You are serving. You are pouring yourself out to love others. You're doing things that don't benefit you but benefit others. You're doing it just like Jesus did. Jesus didn't do it to build himself up.

But to pour himself out to those he loved. Not so he felt comfortable. Not so that he felt he got his desires but so that he could sue others. That is too greatness but it's not easy is it?

It's not easy being a slave. And as I try to think through what is it that makes it so hard I think it comes down to this. It comes down to the one sin.

[17:38] The base sin. And it's a sin of pride. That I want others to see me as great for who I am. So I don't want to serve others.

one of the reformers said really helpful. That pride was the undergarment of sin. It's the first thing we put on as Christians and it's the last thing we take off.

It's like a vest in winter. It's the first thing you put on in the morning and the last thing you take off at night. It sits there festering away. Amongst everything we do and it's a hard one to kick isn't it?

And so we need to watch our pride. We need to admit it. But I have to say that as I thought more about this this church is full of greatness.

Look around you. You've got people who selflessly hear coming early who run rotas who give up their time on Thursdays so children can learn about the Lord Jesus.

[19:01] People sitting next to you who spend their time preparing lessons to teach English as a second language and get the Bible open. People who open up their homes to visitors and strangers even when they're tired and exhausted.

people who come to a parent toddler group on a Monday morning when it's the last thing they want to. People committed to serving the church week in week out year in year out decade in decade out.

Families that cut back so that they could give sacrificially to the church. Families that stay in a smaller house in the Ealing area instead of being able to move to the leafy countryside and have a great larger house and a better stop to live in.

Folk who put their hand up again and again. Friends who look out for one another and call one another up and text one another when the chips are down. Who go out and enjoy one another's company.

Not because it's good for them but because they want to serve each other. And so when I look around and as I think of the church this morning I see a church full of greatness. A church where people do serve one another actually in a great way.

[20:28] The other are still things out that get in the way of our greatness. There are still little things that hold us back from serving. as a minister of this church that very title is supposed to mean servant.

And yet we all know can't we that that can be a way of holding power and authority in a way that's very very unhelpful. I'm not saying that authority is bad but I am saying that you can use your title to get your greatness.

And whatever title we have we must find our greatness not in that. But our greatness should be derived from our serving others.

That's what it means to be a leader. And then as servant hearted people we find ourselves often serving only those who are attractive.

I don't mean that in a physical sense though that is possible isn't it? But we can find it easy to serve some people. It struck me that Jesus didn't say serve the people that you like being around.

[21:47] And he didn't say serve the ones that you're well with. And he didn't say serve the people just like you or people that have the same background as you or serve the people that wear the same kind of clothes as you or serve the people of the same kind of parenting style as you or the ones who have a good sense of humour and you get on well with.

So let's call it speed to speed. Do you know why it's hard to serve other people who are not like us? Because deep down we think we're better than them. We actually think more important or significant that it doesn't actually matter if I don't look after or serve this person or that person. Sometimes the wrong isn't just us despising others and thinking we're better than others but it's exactly the opposite. We look around and we see the gifts of other people. We see their intelligence, their way with people, how good they are with people and we draw comparisons and we feel so inferior.

And then we just back out of services altogether. We back out of relationships because I'm not as good as that. I couldn't possibly do that. Do you want to break free from those ways this morning? Then take a risk. Serve someone. Don't worry about what they're going to think, what they're going to say about you or what they think you think about them.

[23 : 17] just serve them. Look at the example of our Saviour we follow in his footsteps. You see the last weapon against the problem of pride that we see in this passage I think is the Lord Jesus.

He is the greatest one of all. He is the one who spoke and things came into being. He's the one who sustains all things. So our comes and thanks for Muhammad Ali is great.

But we remember Muhammad Ali at the end of his life. Those last 10-15 years shaking the targets. So fragile trying to light the flame at the Olympics.

I can push him over. And in Jesus he's risen to the right hand of God and is ruling over the world.

That's what we're going to look at gloriously tonight and next Sunday night.

Jesus is a man on a mission and his mission is not to lord it over his people. Jesus' mission is not to pulverize his enemies. It's not to be served like some royal prince, although that's what he is.

[24 : 28] Rather, Jesus' mission is to be served up like a lamb. To be served up like a lamb to slaughter. And he takes the penalty that you and I deserve and Jesus drinks that cup of punishment.

And he says to you this morning, let me serve you. Let me save you. And that is the right response, isn't it?

So let this great one serve us. To save us, to trust in what he's done. And then, and only then, we can live lives serving one another because our hope, and our status, and our identity, is secure in him.

Look at verse 29 with me. As they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, Lord, Lord, have mercy on us.

Son of David. The crowd grew a big window. Shut up. Be quiet. But they cried all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David.

[25 : 42] And stopping, stopping, Jesus called them and said, what do you want me to do for you? Same question that he asked James and John's honor. And they said to Lord, let our eyes be opened.

Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. So what's Matthew trying to do here? Matthew is trying to show you the contrast between James and John and the two blind men.

Lord, have mercy on me, they cry. Those are the words of the blind men. There's no I am the greatest here.

These two blind men recognize Jesus for whom he is, that he is the son of David, the promised savior, and they cry out for mercy, and they follow him. And the disciples, they are so thick, so stupid, so blind, that they are striving for greatness in the worldly way.

Not the kingdom way. As I was writing this sermon, I was thinking, I want this sermon to be great. And I actually, I want this sermon to be seen as great.

[27 : 05] I want it to be a great sermon. You hypocrite leave me. But I like you have to run from seeking my glory, to seeking the glory of my savior, and the glory of others.

By serving others. True greatness comes from service. True greatness in a sermon comes from the plain explanation of God's word.

And seeing that, all of us, and how we need to change because of what God says to us all, it's not about the preacher. It's about putting our lives at the feet of our great God.

As I want to say to you this morning, if you've not seen Jesus, it's really great for so many visitors here this morning. It feels like Sarah's brought half the school over there. But if you do not yet follow

him, I want you to look around.

I want you to look around this room and see a community of people who are so convinced of the greatness of Jesus and of his death in our place that we take him at his word and we trust him.

[28 : 18] And so, like Jesus, there's no need for gruesome dictatorships. There's no need for one-upmanship over one another. And I hope that if you come along to this group, what you'll see is a loving community of Christians.

who find their greatness in what Jesus has done for them. And so the Christian life is you follow the example of the Master and you serve.

And if you're not a follower of the Lord Jesus, and if you've come here this morning and you've not really seen him as he is, maybe you're working out this morning that there's something about it.

And can I urge you to cry out for mercy to call out to this, the greatest man that the world has ever seen, who became the slave of God.

And to ask him to take the penalty that you deserve, that he takes the cup that you should really drink, the cup of God's anger, so you can drink today at this table from the cup of God's blessing.

[29 : 35] God's trust him. Let's pray.