

Matthew 20:17-34 | “The Greatest are the Lowliest”  
*Preached on February 25, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

You can turn in your Bibles this morning to Matthew 20, verse 17.

*We will be covering verses 17-34 today. [pause]*

There’s something about the well-known, rich, and powerful that we are drawn to, like bugs to a light. *[pause]*

*We lift up the celebrity, the powerful politician, the influencers, and the wealthy. [pauseee]*

Influencers on social media are followed, and many people model what they do and what they have based on the influencer’s life and recommendations. *[pause]*

Celebrities are fawned over and idolized, with even the most basic thing they do being brought to light, like it’s some groundbreaking news. *[pause]*

Politicians are seen as the ones with the power and are envied.

*We lift up the people who we think are “successful” and act like they are the examples to follow, if we want to be successful in life. [pauseeee]*

But why do we do such things?

*It’s because though we may not say it, we think that those types of people are the greatest.*

And because of this thinking, we try to aspire to be like them.

*We want to be seen in the limelight, we want to be admired, and we want the power and prestige, like we think they get. [pauseeee]*

So many people are striving to be the next influencer on social media, so they can boast a massive following and get recognition.

*So many people are striving to climb that corporate ladder, so that they can be in charge and have the authority to “call the shots”. [pauseeee]*

We want to be known as the best at something, whether it’s being the best mom, dad, wife, husband, grandparent, worker, or whatever else it is that you think you are good at. *[pause]*

*We want the glory, honor, and authority in at least something. [pause]*

Rarely anyone is out there saying, “I want to be a nobody, who is unrecognized, and is at the bottom rung of everything.” *[pause]*

*No wonder a common question is, “Would you rather be rich or famous?” [pauseeee]*

How often do we lift the person up who volunteered to clean toilets, as if they were the greatest?

How often do we highlight the person who regularly serves behind-the-scenes compared to how often we applaud the people who are more up front in public? *[pauseee]*

If you really think about it, we focus on and strive to be in higher up positions, where you are served, rather than accepting lower positions, looking to serve others.

And what we find is that this tendency is not new.

For in our passage today, we will see that the disciples were the same way, but Jesus will show us what true greatness is. *[pauseee]*

Follow along as I READ, starting in verse 17. *[READ VERSES 17-34]*

Let's focus on the middle part, verses 20-28, and then later we will look at the outside bookends of this passage. *[pause]*

So in verses 20-28, we see James and John go with their mother, who requests for her sons to be at the left and right hand of Jesus in the kingdom. *[pauseee]*

It may have been that James and John used their mother to try to persuade Jesus to do this, for they are shown to come with their mother, and you can tell that they really do want this request. *[pause]*

Maybe they were thinking that Jesus would find it harder to turn down a mother's plea for her dear sons.

But either way, the request is made -- they want high up, recognized, authoritative positions in the kingdom. *[pauseee]*

Yet Jesus makes it clear that they don't really understand what they are asking because they don't realize that the path of Jesus is the path of suffering *before* glory. *[pause]*

He also underlines that they are thinking like the world, whose rulers use and abuse their authority.

For the world's leaders often wield their authority in authoritarian ways, but that's not the way of Christ's disciples. *[pause]*

The way of Christ and His disciples is one of *servanthood*.

It's serving others and it's sacrificial, for even He came "to give his life as a ransom for many". *[pauseee]*

*So as we apply this story to our lives, we see that...*

**I. We are called to serve others, not grasp for prestige and power.**

Let's do a quick little evaluation. *[pause]*

I want you to think about your relationships with those who are closest to you.

Let's say that it's your family and you live with them. *[pause]*

Honestly answer this question in your head: how often do you think that other people aren't serving you enough?

Now compare that with how often you think that *you* need to serve them more? *[pauseeee]*

Isn't it interesting how we are more concerned with being served than serving? *[pause]*

We sure have a list of how others are failing at serving us, but we spend little time considering how we may be failing at serving other people. *[pauseeee]*

When James and John thought of the coming kingdom, their eyes got big.

They thought about the glory, honor, and recognition that they could have sitting to the left and right of Jesus. *[pause]*

They thought of the power and prestige that would come along with that.

They didn't want Jesus' seat, but they surely wanted the ones next to Him. *[pauseeee]*

James and John reflect mankind's natural, yet sinful disposition to be at the top. *[pause]*

We want to be first and best.

We want to be in charge, to have the glory and honor, and to be served by others.

We want others to look up to us, not down on us. *[pauseeeee]*

We have a strong aversion to being seen as lowly, like it's some kind of disgusting food that you just can't help but push away. *[pause]*

But here's the thing -- this kind of thinking is like the world.

Jesus says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you." *[pause]*

The rulers of this world often dominate those under them and use their power to their own advantage.

They subjugate and sometimes oppress those below them.

Is that really the way that Christ's disciples are to be? *[pause]*

Should that be our mentality?

Should we grasp for that kind of power and prestige?

Should we align ourselves with the world's thinking? *[pauseeee]*

We think that the greatest are the ones who *get* to be served, but Jesus tells us that the greatest are the ones who serve others. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever heard someone say something that doesn't sound right at all?

That's what Jesus' statement sounds like at first. *[pause]*

The great ones are the servants? The first ones are the slaves?

That's like hearing that the poor are the rich or that the unintelligent are the smart.

It sounds counterintuitive, and it makes it seem like there's something wrong with the saying. *[pauseeee]*

When we think of servants or slaves, we don't think that they are great.

But Jesus is telling us that those who humble themselves to be a servant and slave of others *are* great.

And if God deems them great, then they are truly the great ones. *[pauseeee]*

This is certainly convicting, isn't it?

We don't like calling ourselves a servant or a slave.

We think it's too lowly, but that's our worldly mindset showing. *[pauseeee]*

How often do we call ourselves a servant or slave?

Don't we often balk at the idea of being a slave?

Don't we often recoil at the thought of being a servant? *[pause]*

We would certainly rather be called beloved, special, gifted, amazing, and precious.

Yet how many of us would wear 'servant' and 'slave' as a badge of honor? *[pause]*

Yet Jesus is showing us that we should strive to be the servant and slave of others in how we relate to them.

It should be our goal to serve others, not to be served. *[pauseeee]*

This isn't how we think, but it *ought to be*.

We are disciples of Jesus, so what He calls us to we should strive for. *[pause]*

Instead of using great effort and ambitiously seeking to be at the top, we should use great effort and ambitiously seek to serve others. *[pauseeee]*

We normally want people at our beck and call.

We normally want to make the decisions, and we want people to just do it for us without question or hesitation.

We are looking regularly for ways for our life to be easier and more convenient, and the truth is that being a servant and slave of others means your life is often *harder*. *[pause]*

Being a servant means more effort, more time, more inconvenience, more discomfort.

It means being seen as lowly.

It means sometimes being looked down upon by others, but you can know that God does not look down upon you.

He actually says that the slaves are the first ones. *[pauseeee]*

You see, God is not impressed by our high up positions and how much power we have.

God delights in our service for others and our servant-mindedness. *[pauseeee]*

Let's reshape our thinking to align with Christ's teaching!

Let's see servanthood for what it is - greatness!

Let's not revert back to the world's thinking and ambitions. *[pauseeee]*

A big problem is that our minds are so consumeristic because American culture is consumeristic. *[pause]*

We go to places and expect everything to be laid out and geared to what we want.

We are often catered to in our culture because businesses have to do this to get people to buy their stuff. *[pause]*

We go to places and expect to be served, if we pay a little money.

And if something isn't serving us to our expectations, we just leave and go somewhere else. *[pause]*

Well what's the problem with bringing this consumerist mentality to church or relationships?

You expect everything to be geared to you, and expect everything already laid out for you, as long as you give some money in the offering plate.

And if you aren't pleased, you know that you have a whole swath of other churches you could go to find what you want.

But where's the servant mindset in that scenario?

It's nowhere to be found. *[pause]*

You are not coming to a show here, where all the workers have put in the work to get everything set and ready *for you*.

No, we are all in this together as fellow servants.

We should all be playing a part here because we are *all* called to be servants, not consumers. *[pauseeee]*

Reflect upon yourself.

When you think of this church, do you approach it with a servant-mindset or a consumer one?

Are you willing to step up and serve?

Are you serving in some way? *[pauseeeee]*

Jesus did not make this an option for us, but calls us to be servants and slaves of others.

We are not to be like the world, grasping for power and prestige, so that we don't have to serve as much.

Rather, we are to serve others in love - that's true greatness. *[pauseeee]*

Now the question remains though, how can we be more servant-minded?

*Well we see the answer in our passage this morning...*

## **II. We are to look to Jesus, the perfect example of servanthood.**

Let's look at the bookends of what we just saw.

Both before and after James and John's self-serving request is a description of Jesus. *[pause]*

Right before, in verses 17-19, we see Jesus foretell His coming suffering, death, and resurrection.

And then right after what we just saw is verses 29-34, which tell us about Jesus' healing of the two blind men as he heads to Jerusalem. *[pauseeeee]*

By doing this, James and John's request is set in stark contrast to Jesus' actions and character. *[pauseeee]*

We are often grasping for power and prestige, looking to be served, like James and John.

But what does Jesus do?

He's compassionate, loving, and gives His life as a ransom for many. *[pauseee]*

James and John have their sights on the high up seats, while Jesus has his sights on the lowliness of hanging on a Cross.

James and John are showing that they want to be in charge of others, while Jesus shows that He is a servant of all.

And so by Jesus' character and example, He is showing us in full color what it means to be a servant.

And by His example, He motivates us to serve, too. *[pauseee]*

So how is Jesus depicted here?

Well in one sense, we see that *He is all-powerful*. *[pause]*

He heals these two blind men on the side of the road easily.

He simply touches their eyes, and they can immediately see. *[pause]*

Their blindness was nothing to him, for He easily and immediately healed their sight.

This is the testimony of the Gospels -- Jesus' power is real, unlimited, and unhindered. *[pause]*

His power is not fake, like some magician doing sleight of hand, but it could be immediately verified by the person healed and the crowds. *[pause]*

His power is not restricted by certain situations, and it's not a struggle for him to do.

Rather, the testimony of Scripture is that He used His power at will in all sorts of circumstances. *[pause]*

So we see His healing power in this text, but we also see *His knowing power*.

In verses 17-19, Jesus foretells His suffering, death, and resurrection. *[pause]*

Just look at the specific details that He shares here, for He tells of what will happen in the future as if it happened the day before. *[pause]*

He names the city of His death.

He specifies that He would be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, who would condemn him to death.

He prophesies how they would then deliver him over to the Gentiles.

And He describes that He would be mocked, flogged, crucified, and raised on the third day.  
[pause]

Talk about giving particular details!

He gave the exact process that would happen of the who and the what and the where.

That's Jesus' knowing power on display for all to see. [pause]

So He has healing and knowing power, but we also see His *death-conquering power*. [pause]

It's one thing to heal and know, but to conquer death is on a whole nother level. [pause]

He promises to rise again from the dead, and that's what He did!

The grave couldn't and wouldn't hold Him, but He would be raised the third day. [pauseeee]

Jesus has healing, knowing, and death-conquering power.

He truly is the Lord and the Son of David, as the two blind men call Him. [pauseeee]

If anyone could claim the right to always and only be served, it would be Jesus Christ.

If anyone could claim the right to never do the lowly jobs, it would be Him.

If anyone could claim the right to not have to deal with the lowest of society and do the hard, uncomfortable things, it would be Christ.

Yet though He is the all-powerful Lord and promised King, He's *compassionate*. [pauseeee]

The rulers of this world are like a foil to Christ's rulership.

They use their power to oppress, tyrannize, and dominate.

Christ uses His power in *compassionate ways*. [pause]

Though He is so powerful, He doesn't flaunt His power to try to get recognition, benefits, and comfort.

He doesn't misuse His power for His own ends, but He uses His power in *compassionate love*.  
[pauseeee]

Consider His compassion towards the two blind men.

He is on His way to Jerusalem to go through the all-important task of the Cross, and yet on His way, He has the compassion to heal two blind men. [pause]

He could have easily thought, "I've got something important to do, I don't have the time nor should I put in the effort to tend to these guys." [pause]



We are definitely tempted to do that, aren't we?

We think, "I can't help that person, I've got something big and important to do." *[pause]*

We get so focused on our big, important tasks that we ignore the needs around us.

We get so consumed with *our* situations and *our* trials that we overlook what other people are going through. *[pause]*

We can even excuse it by saying, "Well I'm going through something bigger than what they are going through."

Yet Jesus is on His way to the biggest trial that anyone has ever faced, and He's willing to stop and care for two blind men in need. *[pauseeee]*

How could He do such a thing?

It says, "Jesus *in pity* touched their eyes." *[pause]*

He had pity and compassion on these blind men.

He had mercy on them. *[pause]*

When Jesus saw people in need, who reached out for help in faith, He couldn't help but respond from deep within Him.

That's His character -- He is compassionate. *[pause]*

Though He has all the power in the world, He pities those in need, who cry out for mercy.

What a King! What a Lord!

Don't you realize that Christ's heart overflows with compassion for the needy? *[pause]*

He's not too busy for you.

He's not doing something more important that He can't tend to your needs. *[pause]*

You cry out genuinely for mercy in your need, and He will have compassion.

He will not always do exactly as you expect or when, but you can know that He will be compassionate. *[pauseeee]*

We also see Christ's compassion stand out in light of the fact that the crowd wanted the men to be quiet. *[pause]*

As they are walking, the crowd rebukes the men for calling out to Christ. *[pause]*

Now we don't know the crowd's motivation, but it's definitely not pity or compassion. *[pause]*

They seem to just see these blind men as irritants.

If they could, they would file a noise complaint for these two guys. *[pause]*

Maybe they were thinking, “We just want to have a leisurely walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, we want to just be with him and hear him, but these two guys will not be quiet.” *[pause]*

They did not view them as people in need, but people to be silenced.

And yet, contrary to the crowd’s desire, Jesus has compassion on the men. *[pauseeee]*

He could have easily just felt pressured by the majority opinion that these men needed to be quiet.

He could have thought, “Well the crowd wants them quiet, so I’m not going to disagree with them openly. They like me, and I don’t want to mess that up.”

Yet Jesus is no people pleaser, that’s for sure. *[pause]*

Though the crowd rebuked the needy men, Jesus reached out to them in love. *[pauseeeee]*

Although Jesus is so powerful and high up, He shows compassion, but He even goes beyond compassion to show sacrificial servanthood. *[pause]*

Certainly He sacrificially served these two men, taking time to cure their blindness, when He didn’t have to.

But Jesus’ sacrificial service goes all the way to the point of giving up His life for us. *[pauseeee]*

Remember how He prophesied that He would suffer and die?

Well *why* would He suffer and die?

He tells us in verse 28, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” *[pause]*

Jesus came for the purpose of service.

He came in order to give His life as our ransom.

His whole life and purpose of coming was sacrificial servanthood to the point of death! *[pauseeee]*

Though He has healing, knowing, and death-defeating power...

Though He is the Lord and the promised Davidic King -- He gave His very life in service to us, so that we could be forgiven and free. *[pause]*

It was our sin that deserved death and condemnation, yet He sacrificially served us by taking our place and dying for us, and then rising again. *[pauseeee]*

What better motivation do we have to serve others than Jesus and His work on the Cross?  
*[pauseeee]*

What's sad is that Jesus gave His life for us in service, and yet we feel like we can't give up some extra time, effort, money, or comfort in service to others.

And in light of how Jesus served us, our measly excuses of time, effort, and discomfort melt away. *[pause]*

*You see, Jesus shows us that...*

### **Discipleship is servanthood.**

Jesus shows us the path of servanthood, as His life and character emanate and drip with sacrificial service. *[pauseeee]*

So now what? *[pause]*

Are we going to leave here unchanged? *[pause]*

Are we going to walk out of here unaffected by such a grand act of service as Christ's giving of Himself in our place? *[pause]*

Or are we going to leave changed.

Are we going to leave here transformed by the truth that the greatest are the ones who make themselves the lowliest? *[pause]*

May this truth change how we act with others.

May it change how we view the greatest of this world.

May it change what we highlight and emphasize. *[pause]*

You see, all of us in this church should be servants of each other. *[pause]*

We should actually face situations where we have so many people willing to do some type of service that we have to choose who is actually going to do it. *[pauseeee]*

We should readily give up our church pews for others.

We should readily go and get something for someone without them asking, when we see they are in need.

We should all be willing to get low and get dirty with some of the most menial tasks around the church. *[pause]*

Our natural mindset should be, “How can I help? How can I serve?” rather than thinking that others should be serving us. *[pause]*

Is that your mindset when it comes to this church?

Are you serving others in this church in some way? *[pause]*

How can you be a servant or slave of others, if you aren't even doing 1 thing for others here at your church? *[pause]*

I understand that it will take time, effort, and inconvenience, but that's a part of being a servant, isn't it?

You will have to do hard things, lowly things, time-consuming things, and uncomfortable things, but that's a part of servanthood.

And as we saw today, being a disciple *is* being a servant, for we follow in our Lord's path.

So if you want ideas of how to serve others, come and see me, I'd love to talk further about this with you. *[pauseeee]*

What about how you relate to others?

Do you relate to others with a servant-mindset? *[pause]*

On a daily basis, are you looking for ways to serve your family members at home?

Do you think, “What could I do today to serve my wife? How could I serve my husband? How could I help my parents?” *[pause]*

For some of you, if you asked your spouse or parent, “How can I serve you today?” they would probably fall over backwards.

Maybe you should try it today, and see what happens. *[pauseeee]*

Our minds should be servant-oriented like Christ's.

For though He's so powerful and is Lord and King, He shows us that *even He* went so far as to give His life to serve us. *[pause]*

He's the greatest and showed us that the greatest are the ones who serve.

So being His disciples -- we walk in His servanthood steps and shape our mind after His servanthood mindset.