

# Number One

Matthew 20:17-28

29 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** What does it mean to be great in Jesus' kingdom?

**Big Idea:** Suffering and service are the path to greatness.

## Introduction

If an artist was to release an album with the title track, *I am the Greatest*, would you buy it?

What if I told you that the second track was *I Am The Double Greatest*?

I suspect that sales probably wouldn't go very well here in Australia, where the national attitude is to tear down tall poppies.

If it happened in the US today though, they'd probably make her president.

58 years ago, one of the first rap albums was released by the artist Cassius Clay.

It contains lines like:

*This brash young boxer is something to see  
And the heavyweight championship is his destiny.*

The following year, Clay won the boxing world heavyweight title, converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammed Ali.

Ali was a man who was convinced of his own greatness and wasn't backwards in sharing his belief in himself with the world.

He was thought that being able to speak with his fists made him the greatest.

He wanted nothing more than to be recognised in the most prime and prominent position because he was the most powerful.

And he was so convinced of his own greatness that he was happy to brag about it before he'd even proved that he was the greatest.

This morning's passage is all about greatness.

Jesus shows his disciples what true greatness is like.

Let me tell you, it doesn't look like Cassius Clay's album!

We're going to see that true greatness doesn't come from using your fists, but through service.

## Outline

We've been looking at Matthew's biography of Jesus' life on Sunday mornings.

More specifically, we're in the section of story that goes from the beginning of chapter nineteen through to the end of chapter 22.

It's a turning point for Jesus because he leaves behind the teaching and healing ministry he's been doing in Galilee and begins heading towards Jerusalem and the cross.

{DP} That's what this section is about – heading towards the cross.

Last week, we saw that in Jesus' kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first.

Jesus told his disciples a parable that showed that although some might seem more deserving and others less so, God's grace is the great leveller.

We all need his grace and he's free to be generous as he sees fit.

This morning, we're going to see Jesus describe how his kingdom is different from so many other power structures in the world.

What makes you the greatest in the kingdom isn't being impressive, articulate, the biggest thug, the dirtiest player, the family that you come from or even your position in that family.

In the kingdom of heaven, **suffering and service are the path to greatness.**

- Greatness in God's Plan (vv17-19)
- Greatness in Position (vv20-23)
- Greatness in Service (vv25-28)

## Greatness in God's Plan (vv17-19)

As Jesus and his disciples continue their journey towards Jerusalem, the natural question to ask is, "What they're going there for?"

There are lots of reasons.

Like many other people, they were going up to celebrate the Passover festival, as they go on to do in chapter 26.

Matthew's also very deliberately showing us that Jesus is going to enter the capital city of Israel, Jerusalem, to be enthroned as king.

As King Jesus leads his followers to that place, the theme of kingdom is very much on the agenda.

It's hard for his disciples to get their heads around what his kingdom is like because it has different rules and different expectations to just about every other kingdom.

Not just anyone can enter his kingdom, in fact, it's very hard for people to enter his kingdom.

With man it's impossible and it's possible only with God since it's a kingdom that's founded on grace rather than merit.

A coronation is a really big deal.

It was a massive spectacle when our queen, Queen Elizabeth II, was crowned in 1953.

As the leader of the British Empire, a significant amount of the world watched on with interest.

Will Jesus be welcomed into Jerusalem, finally being recognised as God's long-expected Messiah and given his rightful position on the throne?

Or will he lead an uprising that'll rid Israel of their Roman overlords?

No. He'll empty his father's house, the temple, but not the palace.

It seems like Jesus and his disciples weren't alone and possibly there were crowds still with them as they walked along.

So Jesus takes his disciples aside have a powwow with them on their own, in private.

He clearly explains what his mission is, what the plan is.

Verse eighteen:

**Matthew 20:18–19** NIV11 <sup>18</sup> “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death <sup>19</sup> and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

Jesus talks about himself in the third person, like Ben sometimes does, especially with telemarketers.

That's actually the third time in the gospel that Jesus makes this same claim about his own death, but this time it's even more detailed than before.

Even though the reference to himself as the Son of Man mightn't be all that clear, everything else he says seems clear as day.

At least, it does on this side of the cross.

Because as we keep reading through Matthew's gospel, it becomes clear that the meaning of this still hadn't sunk in for the disciples.

Jesus tells his disciples that when they go up to Jerusalem, he'll be lynched rather than welcomed.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law aren't going to welcome him in as a great and respected teacher.

They're not at all happy with him because he doesn't play by their rules and trouble's been slowly brewing for years.

Jesus and the Jewish leaders have been on a collision course with the point of impact plotted as being Jerusalem.

At this stage, none of the disciples know that one of the blokes standing there with them – Judas – is the one who's going to betray him.

Ultimately, though, it's God himself who'll hand Jesus over to be executed.

It's all part of his plan so that Jesus will be enthroned by dying on the cross.

The cross wasn't Jesus' side-gig.

It wasn't an unfortunate end to an otherwise spectacular and impressive career.

The cross wasn't an unexpected accident.

Jesus didn't just happen to be the wrong person at the wrong time.

It's the focus, the highlight of what Jesus came to do.

The most significant part of his ministry will take place in that city as he wins victory over death by dying on the cross.

It's the Jewish leaders who will condemn him to death and they eventually do all that they can to make sure that he gets executed even though he's found to be innocent at his trial.

Matthew goes out of his way to tell us that they hand him over to the Gentiles though, verse nineteen.

In one sense, that's unsurprising since only the Romans were allowed to execute people, however I think we're also meant to see that Matthew's highlighting what rules they're playing by.

'Gentiles' comes up a number of times in this section.

The Jewish leaders are playing by the rules of human institutions rather than by the conventions of God's kingdom.

Jesus clearly isn't ignorant, naïve or innocent of the fact that this'll be a hard and painful road to travel.

He'll have to face the shame of being mocked and the pain and humiliation of being flogged.

All of that's the lead up to suffering one of the most painful and humiliating deaths that wicked human beings have been able to invent.

It's a significant prediction, isn't it, that he specifically says that he's going to die by crucifixion?

I don't think that's what the disciples were expecting Jesus to say on the road that day.

The Romans counted it as a victory when they killed their enemies and brought them under the thumb because they thought that it showed how great and dominant they were.

Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

There's a long history throughout the Old Testament of the God of the Bible using whole nations, superpowers even, to do his bidding.

And he's about to do it again as God deliberately hands Jesus over.

The Jews and the Romans were thinking that they were great and victorious.

They'd shown their greatness by defeating Jesus, a man who was in their way.

Yet that's precisely how God intended to enthrone his Son, not just over Israel, but over the whole world.

As we know, death wasn't the end of the story for Jesus, but a fresh beginning.

Good Friday was followed by Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead showing that while Jesus was written off by human leaders, he wasn't written off by God.

You'd think that'd get the disciples' attention!

The resurrection was part of the plan long before they got there.

Jesus drew his disciples aside to outline the greatness of God's plan.

Their trip to Jerusalem is going to be a rollercoaster ride of seeming wins and losses, but it's how Jesus is going to be enthroned.

The greatness of God's plan is the cross – that Jesus will die and rise again.

## **Greatness in Position (vv20-23)**

In the next four verses, we're brought from the heights of the cross back to earth. With a thud.

We see some of the disciples think – quite wrongly – that they'll find greatness in getting a good position.

In verse twenty, the mother of two of Jesus' disciples comes to him with her boys in tow.

They clearly haven't left THEIR mother behind for the sake of the kingdom.

Or at least, she hasn't left them!

When we get to chapter 27 we'll find out that her name is Mary, but I think she's very deliberately not named here.<sup>1</sup>

Her two sons – James and John – are often a bit hot-headed and eager to be in the middle of the action.<sup>2</sup>

I like how one writer described them as "colourful characters" who earned the name "sons of thunder."

It looks like it runs in their genes because their mum seems to be a powerful force too – Mrs Thunder by name and nature.

I think I'd be intimidated if I met her in a dark alley.

She's the ultimate helicopter parent who can't help getting involved in her sons' lives.

She's the kind of mum who goes up to the school to fight her kids' battles by speaking on their behalf.

When she comes to Jesus she humbly bows before him, but don't let that fool you.

I'm sure that she'd tell you that Mummy just wants the best for her little Jimmy and Johnny, but her unbridled ambition is clear.

Any doubt about her motive is removed as soon as she opens her mouth.

She wants to secure the best position she can for her boys.

When Jesus asks her what she wants, she pitches quite an audacious request.

The good thing about her request is that it shows that she recognises the reality of the kingdom and its importance.

Sitting on one of the twelve thrones and judging the twelve tribes of Israel is all very well, but her sons deserve nothing less than the best seats in the house.

They deserve to be honoured and so she asks that they be given a position, not just at the table, but at the head of the table, on either side of the king.

In his kingdom, will Jesus grant one of them the honourable position of sitting on his left and the other one the honourable position of sitting on his right?

We know just how unbelievably bold and presumptuous this is from the way that Jesus responds to her request.

Though there's an argument that it wouldn't have been all that surprising given the way that the world worked at the time.

Being near to the king was a position of honour that came with prestige, power and preference.

Everyone did their absolute best to angle their way into the best position they could.

Between the time that Jesus was around and the time Matthew wrote his gospel, there was a naughty Roman lady named Agrippina the Younger.

She was the sister of the Roman emperor Caligula who enjoyed great power due to her position, until she was booted out of Rome for trying to kill him.

She then spent the rest of her life planning on how she could get into a position of influence.

Agrippina went around trying to capture the attention of influential men until she finally seduced her uncle, the Emperor Claudius into marrying her.

The evil genius of her move was that she could then position her son, who would become the Emperor Nero into the emperor's seat.

For the first few years, Nero's mum pretty much ran the Roman empire through her son and she was honoured with the position of being the wife of a god.

There's a carving in the city of Aphrodisias showing her crowning her son.

Jesus tells the two disciples and their mum that they don't know what they're asking.

Of course they don't because they don't really get what's about to happen.

He asks them whether they can drink the cup that he'll drink?

In Jewish thinking, sharing a cup means sharing life and purpose with that person.

The two boys think that they can do anything that Jesus can, perhaps even a little bit better.

They think that they're going to get glory, they're focused on the status, influence and power that'll come with that position and they're certain that they're up to the task.

With certainty, they answer, "You bet we can."

They're probably thinking Jesus doesn't think they'll be up to scratch for dining at the royal table and drinking from the royal cup.

Dining at Auntie Joy's is an institution in our family and for many people outside it.

When you're invited to dine on the balcony of her home overlooking the city, you eat with perfectly polished solid-silver tableware, use a linen table cloths and napkins and drink from hand-made crystal glasses.

It's as close as I'll ever come to dining with the Queen.

When we're honoured with an invitation – we'd never dare to ask for one – I think I'm as frightened as my parents were about the damage our daughters might do.

Unlike the disciples, I'm not sure that we've got the manners or the skills that make us worthy of drinking from her cups!

I'm constantly worried about a breakage.

The cup that Jesus is going to drink from isn't the cup of the king so much as the cup of judgment.

The cup he'll drink contains God's wrath and anger against sin.

There are a number of Old Testament references and allusions to this metaphor.

At the cross, Jesus takes God's wrath at sin on himself.

On the night that he was betrayed in Jerusalem, Jesus cried in the garden of Gethsemane:

**Matthew 26:42** NIV11 <sup>42</sup> He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

James and John probably thought that being on team Messiah would mean there would be casualties, but surely he'd be victorious and triumphant over his enemies.

They were convinced that they were on the road to glory with Jesus.

And they were, but it just didn't end up looking quite like I think they were expecting at this point.

The road to glory would involve experiencing the same kind of suffering that Jesus would experience.

They'll share the cup of suffering too.

Reigning with Jesus means suffering with him as well.

They're going to need grace to suffer before they experience the grace of being with Jesus.

We know a little bit about James and John.

You don't have to read further than Acts to see that James is the first of Jesus' disciples to be martyred.

He was killed by a sword on the orders of King Herod Agrippa.

**Acts 12:2** NIV11 <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Herod was trying to persecute the church and this made many of the Jews very happy.

Peter got arrested too, but he was miraculously freed from gaol.

In one sense, John ended up faring much better.

Jim was the first of the original twelve disciples (other than Judas) to die, while Jack was the last.

Don't think that means he was any stranger to suffering though.<sup>3</sup>

He didn't have an easy life and it ended with him exiled on the island of Patmos.

I think that verse 23 is actually quite amazing.

Jesus says in no uncertain terms that giving the positions on his left and right is above even his pay grade.

The sole prerogative when it comes to that lies with God and Jesus doesn't get to assign those roles.

It's a sobering reminder that even Jesus is submissive to his father.

Even Jesus' authority is only his because it comes from his father.



James, John and Mary come to Jesus because they want a position.

They want the honour and recognition that comes with having a title and the best seats in the house.

They crave the power and privilege that comes with that position.

Which is the way of the world and not the way of Jesus' kingdom.

There are always people who are chasing the recognition that comes with certain positions.

High schools are full of positions of honour and recognition, and they often hand out badges as a symbol of that.

I'm sure you know students who chase the honour and the glory that comes with lots of badges.

Karen served as our year's student council representative for four years when pretty much no one else wanted to give up their lunch times to go to meetings.

But as soon as there was a badge on offer in grade twelve, there were students climbing over each other to get those positions.

I kid you not, there was even a sausage sizzle involved to try and buy votes.

Karen and her years of humble service were shoved to the side as power-hungry students who, as far as I knew and remember had barely lifted a finger, chased the honour of the badge.

That's what these disciples were like.

Are you the kind of person who chases positions for the privilege and recognition they bring?

Do you find that you're motivated to do something when everyone is watching and there's praise to be had, perhaps even when you're recognised as achieving, but you're far less keen when what you do goes unrecognised?

I'm not saying that we shouldn't recognise people's efforts and contributions at all.

But pride is a slippery beast for us all and we need to be genuinely careful if our goal is position and the benefits that might bring.

And we're fighting against a culture that has this hard wired in when everyone has a job title that gives them meaning and significance.

We've got customer service assistants instead of checkout operators.

Because we live in a world not much different from Jesus' world where we get our meaning and significance from what we do rather than who we are as children of God.

That's because people and our heart's craving for position hasn't changed in two thousand years.

When I think of people who serve without position and recognition, one of the people that comes to mind is Ann Cain.

Most of you probably don't know Ann since she attends our sister church at Holland Park.

During the week, she's works as a librarian.

Then on the weekends, she spends a considerable amount of time working on the church library.

As far as I know, she doesn't even have an official job title.

It's the kind of work that most people don't even notice happens.

And she doesn't just work on the library for their church, but for ours as well.

I've covered and catalogued many books in my time and it takes a substantial amount of time.

She's not chasing recognition, but the opportunity to serve.

Ann does that for us even though she doesn't know us personally.

So here's my library plug also – make use of the resources that are being added to all the time.

And if there's something you'd find helpful to be there, let me know and we'll look into getting it.

The disciples who came to Jesus were looking for greatness in position.

Jesus says that's not even his to give.

## **Greatness in Service (vv25-28)**

The key to greatness is to be found in service rather than seeking position.

The other ten disciples are quite upset when they hear about what'd happened.

Were they angry that Jim, Jack and Mary had asked such an awful, inappropriate question?

I don't think so since Jesus addresses all of them.

They were angry at the brothers not so much because they'd dared to ask so much as that they'd dared to ask first.

The rest were worried that they might miss out.

That's what made them jealous, the thought that Jesus might play favourites and that they would miss out.

Jesus gets them together to give them a bit of an explanation.

He was very familiar with the ways of the world.

Style often wins out over substance.

The way to get ahead in the world is to be smooth and you can get a long way if you've got the gift of the gab, even if you don't really have any substance behind you.

We call it senior management.

It's not the way to greatness in Jesus' kingdom though.

How you rule is affected about what you think greatness is.

Greatness is about being the one who's at the top, making all the decisions.

And the reason we see that as greatness is because we think that greatness means having all the benefits that comes with it.

You get to have things your way, you get to earn the big bucks and have all the best things.

Jesus says that the way of the gentiles is that when you're in power, you lord it over other people.

It's not saying that some are more equal than others, like the famous line in Animal Farm.

Rather, that you seek high office so that you can have authority and power.

We all know that's not the values that anyone puts down on paper – companies often declare the total opposite.

In the corporate world they even talk about servant leadership, but it's relatively rare to see it in action.

As many of you know, I spent a number of years working in the service station game, which was a 24/7 business.

Towards the end of one year, I remember talking to a franchisee at a meeting.

We were talking about our plans for Christmas and he said that neither he nor his wife works on Christmas day because, "That's what you've got staff for."

I was shocked.

Working for Christians and Christian-influenced people, I was used to a culture of all owners and managers working on Christmas Day.

In fact, they'd often take the most inconvenient parts of the day so that staff could be with their families.

That's a big difference in cultures.

The Romans were all about power and authority and that's what the disciples were used to, what they'd seen and observed.

Their ambition was to get the best position, but Jesus says that it shouldn't be that way with them, verse 26.

Getting position for the recognition, status and power that it gives you shouldn't even be on the radar.

There's nothing wrong with having ambition.

Having ambition isn't the problem, it's actually a good thing.

What matters is what you're ambitious for.

The only right ambition is the desire to serve, regardless of what that looks like.

Jesus says that if you want to become great, then you need to serve everyone else.

Being first means that you've got to be a deacon.

A deacon literally means someone who helps and serves.

It wasn't originally a technical term for an office in the church, but simply meant to wait on tables.

There's a parallel here which is common in Hebrew writing where the same point is made in two slightly different ways.

Jesus says that the greatest aren't just servants, but slaves.

Slaves were at the very bottom of the heap in the social structure.

It would've been controversial at best, for Jesus to say that they must become like slaves.

A slave in the ancient world becoming the top was unheard of.

True greatness is in serving others.

That Jesus would say that you need to become like slave was almost unthinkable.

Greatness depends on your willingness to serve, you've got to become the servant of all.

You don't do these things to become great though.

The motivation is to be like our saviour, Jesus, who demonstrated this.

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

He's not the king who sits on this throne, waiting to be served by others with all kinds of pomp and splendour.

He came to serve.

In this regard, I think that Queen Liz is actually quite a good example.

She certainly has lots of privilege and access to good stuff, but her life is undeniably driven by service.

And that's not just lip service, but it's seen in all kinds of ways by the people she meets.

She's dedicated to her serving others.

Jesus will practice what he preaches.

He didn't use his life to have a good time.

He didn't come to get a following who'd say how great he is.

He didn't just come to be recognised for his wisdom.

He came to serve by going to the cross.

To echo the thoughts of Philippians 2, he didn't see equality with God something to be grasped, but instead became a servant.

He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the father.

He went to the cross to serve people like you and me who need our sin forgiven.

He paid the ransom that would allow us to go free.

We tend to think of a ransom being paid to kidnappers.

The typical idea that comes to our mind is that you don't pay the kidnappers because even if it works this time, it only encourages them to do it again.

But in the ancient world, the first thing that would've come to mind was the ransom paid to allow a slave to go free.

Jesus paid the price so that slaves to sin could be set free.

The cost was his life, the freedom was ours.

The disciples couldn't copy his atoning death and neither can we.

Instead, the point is to have the same attitude as Christ.

Being willing to put our lives on the line for the sake of serving others.

Jesus is our model and example in seeking to serve others, rather than getting them all to serve us because of our position.

I want to thank everyone who serves us in so many ways.

I'm thankful for all the people who faithfully serve us in ways that we constantly see, especially serving up the front.

Then there's also the people who serve on things like sound, DP, streaming, creche and cleaning.

When they do their job well and there aren't any tech challenges, no one even notices what they do.

But when things go wrong, it makes a big difference.

There are lots of other acts of service like this too.

No one else might see you staying up late and getting up early to pour over your Sunday School lesson so that you can teach the kids clearly and faithfully.

People aren't likely to notice when you drop by the church several times during the week to fix something that's broken.

Sometimes those acts of service are far more costly than the things that're seen.

Sometimes, we can feel like we're so small and insignificant that what we do doesn't really matter all that much.

Many of us may feel like we don't do anything particularly radical or noteworthy.

We quietly go about loving and serving others knowing that we're not the kind of people that people write books and songs about.

It's often costly in all sorts of ways – mentally as you're exhausted from concentrating and actively listening to what's being said, emotionally as you carry another's burdens, physically as you forgo sleep for the benefit of another.

And you might even feel some slight pangs of guilt that it buoys you spiritually as you come to the end of your own wisdom and are forced to depend on the Lord.

Many of the text messages full of encouragement that you send sometimes even go unanswered.

The hours spent patiently listening on the phone as a brother or sister pours out their heart.

In fact, your heartfelt prayers don't go unnoticed by God, but there's no one there patting you on the back for the time spent on your knees.

Sometimes you find yourself wondering whether it's worthwhile.

Friend, if that's you, then please press on because your service and sacrifice is far from insignificant.

Far from being small, what you do is huge and I'm thankful for you.

Don't underestimate what you do.

You are great in the kingdom of heaven.

I won't be surprised on the last day when our Saviour says to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter my rest."

Greatness comes through service, not high position.

## Conclusion

Jesus' kingdom is so different from other kingdoms.

So often, we're told that greatness come from being first.

Greatness is about promoting yourself so that everyone knows you're number one.

But not in Jesus' kingdom.

In his kingdom, greatness doesn't come from being first, but from being last.

Suffering and service are the path to greatness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:55

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:38; Luke 9:54

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 1:9

# Number One

Matthew 20:17-28

29 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** What does it mean to be great in Jesus' kingdom?

**Big Idea:** Suffering and service are the path to greatness.

## Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the disciples made of Jesus' disclosure in verses eighteen and nineteen?
2. What are some of the challenges and blessings for someone's who's a dual citizen of Jesus' kingdom and a worldly kingdom?
3. Why does Jesus say that James and John's mother doesn't know what she's asking?
4. What is the cup that Jesus is going to drink?
5. Why are the other ten disciples upset when they heard about this?
6. How is the cross an act of service and servanthood?
7. Is there anything wrong with wanting to be great?
8. Most of us probably don't see ourselves as rulers or high officials. What does this passage have to say to us?