

Fellow redeemed sinners, redeemed by the blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,

In our Scripture selection we observe the desire for prominence occurring among Jesus' disciples. What is truly sad is the timing of the incident, for just prior to our text we read, "And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again." (Matthew 20:17-19) Yeah, it's sad that the disciples were more concerned about their own ambitions rather than what the Lord Jesus was then very soon to endure— His bitter sufferings, death, and resurrection, to pay for the sins of the whole world.

However, is it not true that we are often just like the disciples in that we think about ourselves more than we think about the Lord Jesus Christ and what He has done and still does for us? Are we not frequently self-centered? Oh, we certainly are, "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

So, fellow Christians, we need to set our priorities in order and to be corrected in our thinking which the devil, the wicked world, and our own sinful flesh misleads at times. Thankfully, our Scripture selection can be of help to us as it informs us in regards to:

"TRUE GREATNESS IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM"

With that as our theme, may we, in view of our text and with the help of the Holy Ghost, see—

- 1) What true greatness is and is not
- 2) How true greatness is obtained and how it is not obtained

Verses 20 & 21, -----. (Matthew 20:20-21)

Jesus had just spoken of His then upcoming sufferings, death, and bodily resurrection. *Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him.* Mark's Gospel informs us that at that time it was, "James and John, the sons of Zebedee," who came "unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldst do for us whatsoever we shall desire." (Mark 10:35) Hence, by comparing both Gospel accounts we observe that it was James and John with their mother who came to Jesus desiring a certain thing of Him.

Notice that the mother and her sons – James and John – ALL believed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and God, for they rightly WORSHIPED Him, and James and John addressed Him as their MASTER.

My friends, it is right and proper to worship Jesus Christ and to know Him as our Master, Lord, and God, for Colossians 2:9 states, "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." Furthermore, Acts 4:12 declares concerning Jesus Christ, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

Oh, we all certainly need to know Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, for Holy Writ reports: "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; [And] the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (Romans 3:23; 6:23; John 3:16) JESUS CHRIST IS the ONLY WAY to God and heaven!

Accordingly, realize that true greatness in Christ's kingdom is first of all sitting with Jesus – being with Jesus – SPIRITUALLY by having faith in Him, for Jesus once said, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here!

or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21) Yes, the kingdom of God – God’s kingdom of grace – is in the hearts of those who believe on Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.

The mother of James and John had something to ask of Jesus whom she worshiped, *And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.* We learn from St. Mark’s account that James and John themselves also asked Jesus, saying, “Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory.” (Mark 10:37) Hence, both the mother and her sons were not bashful about asking for a big blessing from the Lord Jesus Christ.

James, John, and their mother knew that Jesus Christ is the Lord God who would one day sit on His throne of glory, for not long before the incident recorded in our text Jesus told His disciples, as we read in Matthew 19:28, “Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Thus, true greatness in Christ’s kingdom will be PHYSICALLY had in His kingdom of glory in heavenly bliss by His believers after Jesus’ visible return to earth when He comes to judge the world, for John 5:28-29 relates, “the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” 2 Timothy 2:12 adds, “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us.”

Let us therefore, with the help of God, persist in faith in Jesus Christ, for true greatness in Christ’s kingdom is first of all sitting with Jesus – being with Jesus – SPIRITUALLY by having faith in Him; and, true greatness in Christ’s kingdom will be PHYSICALLY had in His kingdom of glory in heavenly bliss by His believers – all true Christians – when

their bodies are resurrected on the Last Day, “For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.” (Philippians 3:20-21)

Therefore, take it to heart that true greatness in Christ’s kingdom IS NOT worldly greatness or worldly glory in this present evil world, “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come,” declares Hebrews 13:14. Furthermore, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as He stood before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, clearly stated, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” (John 18:36)

Let us never forget what true greatness is and is not. Let us cling to Christ Jesus in heart-deep faith as our personal Savior and Lord, for only then will we know true greatness.

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As we continue to ponder our text to its conclusion, let us see how true greatness is obtained and how it is not obtained.

Verses 22 & 23, ----- (Matthew 20:22-23)

The mother of James and John had come to Jesus and asked, “Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.” The woman desired the best for her sons. *But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of 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 shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.*

Notice that true greatness in Christ's kingdom of glory is obtained ONLY BY GOD'S GRACE as a gift from Him, for in Christ's kingdom of glory the positions of highest honor at the throne of Jesus will be *given to them for whom it is prepared of Jesus' heavenly Father*. Likewise, true greatness in Christ's kingdom of grace on earth, sitting with Jesus spiritually by faith, is also a GRACIOUS GIFT OF GOD since Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly states, "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Oh, it's certain we cannot earn God's favor, for Isaiah 64:6-7 reports, "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities."

Indeed, faith in Jesus Christ is NOT something we human beings can produce in ourselves, for Holy Writ declares in no uncertain terms, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. For... the gospel of Christ... is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." (Romans 10:17; 1:16-17) So, I repeat, TRUE GREATNESS IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM IS OBTAINED ONLY BY GOD'S GRACE AS A GIFT FROM HIM.

Looking again at our sermon text in verses 22 & 23, we see that James and John, together with their mother, did not realize what they were asking of Jesus, for there is a very high cost to those who would be closest to Christ. Jesus was then about to partake of a cup of suffering and a baptism in blood such as the world had never seen before; and, those who would be closest to Jesus need to be ready to do likewise.

Jesus did not hide the truth from James and John, for they would and later did suffer in this world because of the faith they had in Jesus Christ.

Concerning James, we read in the book of Acts, "Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword." (Acts 12:1-2) And, John was exiled, for he reports in Revelation 1:9, "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." So it is: first the cross, later the crown of glory.

The positions of greatness at the right and left of Jesus' throne in His kingdom of glory were not His to give because those who will occupy those positions of honor have already been chosen by God the Father whom Jesus is always in full concert with. Jesus would never change His heavenly Father's will since the Son and the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, are but the one true God, always in complete harmony and agreement, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." (1 John 5:7)

Verse 24, ----- (Matthew 20:24)

The other disciples of Jesus overheard what James and John, together with their mother, had asked of Jesus. *And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren*. Mark's Gospel puts it this way: "And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John." (Mark 10:41) Oh, the ten were really ticked-off, probably not so much as to what James and John had said, but because those two brothers thought of it first, as is evident from Jesus' subsequent discourse.

Verses 25-28, ----- (Matthew 20:25-28)

The all-knowing Lord Jesus knew exactly what His disciples were thinking and saying. *So, Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever*

will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

The term “gentiles” – as Jesus uses it in our text – simply means the pagan unbelievers. Hence, the jockeying-for-position and the ruling over others that is so sought-after by most folks in the wicked world is NOT to be the attitude and practice among followers of Jesus Christ. Greatness in Christ’s kingdom is NOT obtained by strong-arm tactics or cheating or other sneaky sinful methods; rather, greatness in Christ’s kingdom is had by God-given faith— “faith which worketh by love.” (Galatians 5:6) Hence, humility and love is what the Lord looks for and considers great in His followers, NOT pompous pride and jealousy.

Think about the following words Jesus said to the twelve: *whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.* Accordingly, it’s evident that high self-esteem and haughtiness is totally out-of-place among followers of Jesus Christ; but, humility, low self-esteem, and an attitude of self-sacrificing service is what Jesus looks for in His followers. It’s as Philippians 2:3 directs us, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” And, Galatians 5:13-14 reminds us, “brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Therefore, note well that in Christ’s kingdom things work the opposite way from how they work in the kingdoms of this wicked world.

My friends, consider the perfect example of humble, loving, self-sacrificing service that we have in Jesus Christ, who rightly said to His disciples: *whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man*

came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Jesus Christ, the Son of man, served other people to-the-max, even though He is also the Son of God who had and has the right to demand and command everyone to serve Him. Think about Jesus’ humble service. For example, John 13:3-5 reports that in the very night in which He was betrayed, “Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.” Think of it: the Lord Jesus washing the dusty feet of His disciples in loving service to them.

What is more, think about the Lord Jesus Christ giving His very own life to pay for all the sins of all people. What amazing love! What humility! It’s as we read in Philippians 2:5-8, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Yes, Jesus Christ – who is God – willingly and lovingly humbled Himself, giving Himself into death on the accursed tree of the cross to redeem us miserable sinners: that is love-to-the-max! That is the grace of God in action! “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” (Romans 5:6-8; 1 John 2:2) Accordingly, we Christians need to strive to follow the example of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in living in humble service to God and our fellow human beings.

Let us daily and sincerely repent of our sins. Let us keep our full trust and confidence in Christ Jesus as our personal Savior and Lord. And, let us go forward endeavoring to be more and more fruitful in our God-given faith, since we have seen what it means to have true greatness in Christ's kingdom. Amen.

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