Sermon Series: 8 Factors in Life Transformation
Sermon Title: A Servant's Heart

Text: Matthew 20:20-28 -- Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Introduction: Violin virtuoso **Joshua Bell** is that rare prodigy who has matured into a world class musician and an acclaimed interpreter of Mozart, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. Now in his forties, ***Bell has always been driven to be the best, even while growing up in Bloomington, Indiana***. Whether it was tennis (*he placed 4th at a national tennis tournament at the age of 10*), computers, video games or the violin, he always wanted to master his environment. As a matter of fact, in some places, he is better known for some of these other talents. Years ago, back in Bloomington, a 12-year-old boy approached him and announced, "***You're Joshua Bell. You're famous***." "***Well, um, not really***," Bell replied. "***Yes, really***," the kid insisted. "***Your name is on every video game in the arcade as the highest scorer***!" Evidently, greatness is measured in different ways by different people. I know this is true when it comes to the Kingdom of Heaven. It certainly has its own standard of greatness. Sometimes it is measured by how we honor God's Word (**Matthew 5:19 -- Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven**) and at other times by how we respond to people considered to be of lower status such as children (**Luke 9:48 -- "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great"**). In either case, and this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, ***our Lord never discouraged***

anyone for wanting to be great in His kingdom. Now I know that many of us have been taught that Christians are to be humble and seek to go unnoticed in the world, but I would suggest to you that humility and greatness are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the former, we're told, results in the latter (**Luke 18:14 -- For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted).** By the way, the word "exalted" means "to be lifted up" as in "honored" in this context.

We're down to our next to the last message in the study we're calling "***Eight Factors in Life Transformation***." It is based on the research of LifeWay Research in a study they conducted called "***Transformational Discipleship***." By observing the spiritual habits and attitudes of 1,000 pastors and 4,000 Protestant churchgoers in **North America,** they hoped to determine **the importance of eight attributes** that are common to **convictional Christians**. The first three we have already covered. These include **(1) *Unashamed*** – which measures how open believers are in living out their Christian faith in the world and in the church. **(2) *Exercising Faith* --** by trusting in God's perfect plan for your life while encountering trials and suffering. **(3) *Seeking God* –** which is the cure for spiritual depression and involves talking to God and some self-talk about our hope in God**; (4) *Building Relationships*** – I'll remind you that we looked at 3 roadblocks to Christian community – a self-serving, self-sufficient and self-indulgent attitude. Then we considered the cure – deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Christ; **(5) *Bible Engagement* –** In **Psalm 1**, we're told that the blessed person delights himself in God's law and meditates of it day and night**; (6) *Sharing Christ*** -- out of love for unbelievers. **T**oday we're going to consider … **(7) *Selflessly Serving Others.***

In the text we're studying this morning, our Lord settled a dispute about some aspirations for greatness that two of the disciples (*James and John*) possessed, much to the dismay of the other ten. Now I invite you to open your Bibles to **Matthew 20:20-28** and let's see what Jesus had to say to those who desire to be lifted up and known as great in God's Kingdom.

Background: Just prior to these verses Jesus gave a third and final prediction of His suffering, death and resurrection. Not totally grasping the meaning of His words, the disciples figured that the kingdom of which Christ had spoken time and again was about to become a reality as their Messiah prepared to deliver them from their enemies. With this thought in mind, two began posturing for the positions of honor next to Christ. Their request, we're told, caused no small reaction among the other disciples. In light of their conflict and mistaken ideas about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus taught them what true greatness looks like

under His reign. As we ponder His words, I would encourage you to consider that **when it comes to greatness in the Kingdom of God, Christ would have us consider three questions:**

Why do we want it? -- **Matthew 20:20-21 -- Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."** -- It is interesting to note that Jesus did not rebuke James and John for wanting to be great in His kingdom. He did, however, address their motives for wanting to achieve greatness. Their request to sit on His right and left in the Kingdom was the equivalent of seeking the highest places of honor. The text says that it was actually their mother who came to Jesus with the appeal. Why did she make it? There is, in my opinion, some good evidence that her name was **Salome** (**See Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25**), the sister of Jesus' mother Mary. If I'm correct, then she was our Lord's aunt on His mother's side. ***Perhaps then she was appealing to her place in the family as grounds for granting her request for her two sons,*** which would have been Jesus' cousins. No matter what the reason, it is clear that James and John in no way objected to it and that is where the problem lay. Like the Pharisees who loved the places of honor at banquets and while holding court in the synagogue, *James and John were seeking self-glory and not the glory of God*. On the other hand, ***unlike most Middle-Eastern Kings*** who took great pleasure in demonstrating that they had the resources to grant any request (**For an example see Mark 6:23**), Jesus did not agree to their wishes. They were seeking the wrong source of greatness and needed some correction. That's why Jesus went on to explain that greatness can be a worthy ambition, but not when it is for self-centered reasons.

Disciples of Christ who desire to do great things for the Kingdom must always check their motives. No matter how REASONED, GOOD OR NOBLE our motives may appear to be, whenever our actions draw attention away from Christ and to ourselves, we stand in the same place as the Pharisee sand James and John ***in their unabashed pursuit of self-glory***. Kingdom believers are called to bring honor and glory to our Lord (**1 Peter 4:11 -- … whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ**) and not to ourselves.

In an article for *The Wall Street Journal*, writer **Leonard Mlodinow** shares a funny story from the life of baseball great Joe DiMaggio: It was the summer of 1945, and World War II had ended. Former soldiers, including famous baseball stars,

streamed back into America and American life. ***Yankee slugger Joe DiMaggio*** was trying to be "Yankee fan Joe DiMaggio," sneaking into a mezzanine seat with his four-year-old son, Joe, Jr., before rejoining his team. A fan noticed him, then another. Soon throughout the stadium people were chanting, "***Joe, Joe, Joe DiMaggio***!" DiMaggio, moved, gazed down to see if his son had noticed the tribute. He had. "***See, Daddy***," said the little DiMaggio, "***everybody knows me***!" When a four- year-old mistakenly believes that the glory given to His father is really his, we laugh and think it's cute. But when a mature believer tries to divert to himself honor and glory that is due his Father, it is neither cute nor funny. MOTIVES MATTER IN THE KINGDOM AND WE WOULD DO WELL TO REMEMBER THIS.

How can we attain it? Matthew 20:22-23 -- Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" -- In response to the request of the Sons of Zebedee, our Lord informed them that they really had no idea what they were actually asking for. The path to greatness, contrary to their understanding, demanded that they follow in the footsteps of Christ. "**Can you drink the cup I'm going to drink**?" he asked. What did Jesus mean by this? The "***cup***" about which He spoke had nothing to do with worldly honor, but of suffering and death as He bore the agony of our sins on the cross (**Matthew 26:39 -- And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will**"**).** Having no ability to grasp the meaning of His words, the two answered, "**We are able**." I suspect Jesus responded rather tenderly when He said, "**You will drink from my cup**," indicating that they both would suffer greatly for His kingdom (**See Acts 12:2; Revelation 1:9**). Now why would Jesus ask this question in follow-up to their request? Because He wanted them to understand the greatness comes at the cost of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and living for Christ, something the twelve initially failed to do, but later accomplished as they shared in the fellowship of His sufferings.

The pathway to greatness in the Christ's kingdom is marked with self-denial and the death of personal ambitions. Just as the disciples failed to grasp the meaning of His words back then, so I suspect that many today still do not get it. In modern evangelical Christianity greatness is often measured by the size of one's church, the number of books authored and the amount of notoriety achieved. We have adopted cultural standards and applied them to the church, in spite of what our

Lord so clearly said. After painting a different picture of how glory would be achieved, Jesus then concluded His comments to James and John by saying, "…**but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father**." God the Father is the One who determines who is going to be honored in the Kingdom and it will not be on the basis of favoritism or ambition, but according to His good, perfect and acceptable will.

What will we do with it? -- **Matthew 20:24-28 -- And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." --** Having overheard their conversation, the other ten disciples were somewhat frustrated and so became indignant (i.e., *voiced their displeasure*) with James and John. Jesus called the twelve together and explained ***how greatness is evidenced in His Kingdom***. Using Himself and the Roman rulers ("*their great men*") as examples he contrasted their love for positions of authority and the respect accorded them as a result, with His willingness to set aside the pursuit of glory and serve humanity. Jesus, the greatest one of all (*He alone shared in the divine glory and displayed the majesty of God*—**See Luke 9:29, 42-43**), chose not to be served, though He deserved nothing less as the Son of God, but to serve and to give His life a ransom (**See Romans 6:23; Hebrews 9:22; Leviticus 17:11**) for many. In the same way, ***mature Christians*** should aspire to greatness in God's kingdom. No where in the Word of God are we called to a life of mediocrity. But greatness comes to us when we drink the cup of Christ, die to self and live to serve others for His glory. May any honor that we receive from our Lord be based on the kind of greatness achieved in this way!

The Transformational Discipleship Study: In Lifeway's survey regarding the **eight factors, they say are essential in life transformation,** the respondents indicated that the selfless service of others is important to them. **Here's what the survey revealed**: 63% (*almost 2/3rds*) agree with the statement, "***I intentionally try to serve people outside my church who have tangible needs***." Another 45% say they are using their spiritual gifts to serve God and others. Here are some of their other findings to think about: **(1)** when it comes to service, believers are less likely to give money than time. Only 33% said, "***I intentionally give up certain***

purchases so I can use that money for others." **Ed Stetzer**, the president of LifeWay Research comments, "***Service and activism have become popular in our culture today, especially among younger adults. However, most of the benevolent activity is fairly low-level involvement that does not cost the giver much***." **(2)** Researchers also found a link between service and other attributes of convictional Christians. Those who scored high on serving God and others also scored high on sharing their faith and Bible engagement. **I find it interesting that taking the posture of a humble servant and using what we have for the glory of God and the good of others results in a greater heart of compassion for the lost and more zeal to know God and His will for our lives**. Certainly, this is something to think about. Now let's consider these applications from the Parable of the Talents.

Applications:

- **You're not a servant until someone treats you like one.**
- **If you want to follow in the footsteps of Christ, you must serve one another (John 13:12-17 -- When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.**)
- **When Jesus returns it will be a day of great celebration for His faithful servants, and a day of great terror for everyone else** (**See Matthew 25:34-46** – Our treatment of those who hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, in prison for the sake of Christ will distinguish us from those bound for Hell).

Conclusion: ***The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*** *is a* 1958 20th Century Fox Film based on the true story of Gladys Aylward a faithful missionary in a remote Chinese village who helped run an inn for traveling mule drivers. The **China Inland Mission Center in England** refused to sponsor her due to her lack of vocation and experience, so in 1932 she set out on her own, believing with all her heart it was God's call on her life. After years of service, the Chinese Mandarin (governor) of the town of Yang Cheng made Gladys the official "foot inspector," a position that required her to convince the town's aristocracy to cease the injurious tradition of binding young women's feet to prevent them from growing. Because of her demonstrated love, she was given the name **Jennai**, meaning "***one who loves people***." When the Japanese army invades northern China, the village Mandarin, elders, and Jennai enter a conference room and take a seat around a large circular

table. The Mandarin offers a toast saying farewell to the past: "In a little while we must leave our city, perhaps for years, perhaps forever. For those of us who are old, certainly forever. "***Elders of Yang Cheng, I thank you for your help in this time of trouble. But we were born to our trouble. There is one who has taken it upon herself not from necessity, but from love***." He stands up and all the elders follow. Jennai, however, remains seated. "***Jennai, we thank you from those who are not here, whose children you have taken as your own, for the poor, and the sick, and the afflicted, from all the people of Yang Cheng, for the past and for the future. I honor you for your strength. I wish to share with you the faith from which it comes***." Jennai, realizing he is talking about her Christian faith, is overcome with emotion. "***City recorder, close the book of Yang Cheng with this entry: as a sign of respect for the honored foot inspector of this city, the Shian Sang of Yang Cheng has become a Christian***." Jennai lifts her head slightly and begins to weep openly. "***Oh, I thank you for this great gift***." "***Jennai,***" the Mandarin says as he puts his hand on her shoulder, "***accept my gift. It is offered with love***." Now there's a true servant. Honored for serving, she brought glory not to herself, but to her Lord. May we, as maturing believers, be ambitious for the same outcome.