Sermon Series: The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity
Sermon Title: You Become a Servant

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: Joshua Bell emerged from the Metro and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript—a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play. **For the next 45 minutes, in the D.C. Metro on January 12, 2007, Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly taking notice**. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man for the world-renowned violinist he is. They also might have noted the violin he played—a rare Stradivarius worth over $3 million. It was all part of a project arranged by **The Washington Post**—"an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?" Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for $100. In the subway, Bell garnered about $32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation. **(Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," The Washington Post (4-10-07))**

Evidently, greatness is not always recognized. 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 of lower status such as children** (**Luke 9:46-48 -- An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. 47 But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side 48 and said to them, "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 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** -- *the word "exalted" means "to be lifted up" as in "honored"*).

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. I have decided to use this passage to identify yet another characteristic of maturity in our series (***The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity***), and it is…**WHEN YOU BECOME A SERVANT**. 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, the mother of two of them (James and John) began posturing for the positions of honor for her sons next to Christ. Her 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, let's look at **three questions** that any Christian should ponder if he or she desires to GREAT in the Kingdom of God.

"*Why do you 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 the mother of James and John for wanting her sons to be great in His kingdom. **He did, however, address the motives for wanting to achieve it**. ***The request to sit on His right and left in the Kingdom was the equivalent of seeking the highest places of honor***. I think we can understand why a mother would want this for her offspring. **But why did the wife of Zebedee dare ask this of Jesus**? Some believe that her name was **Salome**, the sister of Jesus' mother Mary. If this were true, 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,*** who 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 (**Matthew 23:5-7 -- They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others**), *James and John were seeking self-glory and not the glory of God*. **Jesus, on the other hand, *unlike most Middle-Eastern Kings* who liked to show that they had the resources to grant any request** (**Mark 6:23 -- And Herod vowed to the daughter of Herodias, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom**), **did not agree to their wishes**. His reason for denying it was simple. ***From His perspective, greatness was a worthy ambition, but not when it was for self-centered reasons***.

Disciples of Christ who desire to do great things for the Kingdom must always check their motives. **Whenever our actions**, no matter how reasoned, good, or noble they appear to be, **draw attention away from Christ and to ourselves**, we are guilty of the same offense committed here by James and John---the pursuit of self-glory. Kingdom believers are called to bring honor and glory to our Lord and not to ourselves. That's what the Apostle Peter said in **1 Peter 4:10 -- As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.** **Most people have never heard of the pro football running back named Tony Richardson. That's because his primary role involved helping other running backs succeed**. He would block so they could run. He was so good at it, that for nine consecutive seasons, each running back he made holes for rushed for at least 1,000 yards In 2001, he was slated to be the main running back, but instead he went to his teammate Priest Holmes and told him, "***It's time for me to step out of the way. You need to be getting the ball. And I'm going to do everything I can to help you***." Holmes went on to lead the league in rushing with 1,555 yards, but Richardson never grew envious or resentful. As Holmes would report, "***He used to call me up and say, 'I just saw you on SportsCenter! He was happier for me than I was for myself***.'" All of the running backs that Richardson helped succeed contend

that his influence went beyond blocking for them. **He would constantly talk to them through the game, advising, pushing, encouraging, and inspiring them**. In a later interview, Tony Richardson said, "**I can't explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me**." (*Joe Posnanski, "Made to Last," Sports Illustrated (August 23, 2010), pp. 49-51).* ***Wow! Don't you wish more people felt the same way about giving glory to God***? (**Review: Greatness – Why do you want it?**)

"***How can you 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 had no idea what they were 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 with suffering and death. That's what Jesus experienced as He bore the agony of our sins on the cross. Having no ability to grasp the meaning of His words, the James and John 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 (**Acts 12:1-2 -- About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword; Revelation 1:9 -- I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus**). Now, why would Jesus ask this question as a follow-up to their request? **Because He wanted them to understand that 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 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 based on favoritism or ambition, but according to His good, perfect, and acceptable will. (**Review: Greatness – Why do you want it? How can you attain it?**)

"***What will you 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 with the Sons of Zebedee**. Ever the teacher, Jesus called the twelve together and explained **HOW GREATNESS IS EVIDENCED IN HIS KINGDOM**. Using Himself and the Roman rulers ("*THEIR GREAT ONES*") 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 was by far the greatest one of all since He alone shared in the divine glory and displayed the majesty of God**—**Luke 9:29 -- And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white; Luke 9:42-43 -- While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astonished at the majesty**

of God), **yet He 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** (**paid to God**—**See Romans 6:23; Hebrews 9:22; Leviticus 17:11**) **for many**.

As we wrap this up, let me encourage you to ASPIRE TO BE GREAT IN GOD'S KINGDOM. After all, I have never found a single verse in the Word of God that calls us to a life of mediocrity. BUT REMEMBER THAT GREATNESS IS ACHIEVED WHEN **WE DRINK THE CUP OF CHRIST, DIE TO SELF, AND SERVE OTHERS FOR HIS GLORY**.

Conclusion: ***The Inn of the Sixth Happiness,*** a 20th Century Fox film from 1958, is 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***." In the film, when the Japanese army invaded northern China, the village Mandarin, elders, and Jennai entered a conference room and took seats around a large circular table. The Mandarin offered 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 stood up and all the elders followed. Jennai, however, remained 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 realized he was talking about her Christian faith, and that's when she was 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 lifted her head slightly and began to weep openly. "***Oh, I thank you for this great gift***." "***Jennai,***" the Mandarin said as he put 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, seek the same outcome for our lives.**