

A twelve-year-old won a backstage pass to meet her favorite vocalist. As she was shaking hands with the pop star the fan blurted: “I would give anything to sing like you!” “Anything?” the star answered while wiping the sweat of her performance from her eyes. “Would you give eight hours a day to practice?”

It takes hard work, dedication, and a lot of practice to become a great musician, athlete, or artist. Yet even if you achieve greatness in one of those areas, your accolades won’t follow you into the next life. Your Olympic medal will melt in the fires of Judgment Day and so will your Grammy award. Do you want to be forever great? Then be eager to serve, and be ready to suffer. That’s the way to forever-greatness says Jesus. Let’s find out more as we turn to our sermon text.

The brothers James and John, two disciples of Jesus, thought that becoming great depended not so much on what you know but on who you know. And so together with their mother (who is mentioned in the Matthew 20 account but not in Mark 10) they came to Jesus and said: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (Mark 10:35). Have you tried walking into corporate headquarters with your mom to say to the CEO: “I want you to do me a big favor. Will you say yes?” Most CEOs would toss you out of the office if not fire you on the spot for such presumptuousness. Jesus could have done the same thing – especially because he knew what James and John had in mind. But he patiently let them make their request: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37). James and John wanted to be forever great and they thought Jesus could make that happen. They must have been surprised then when Jesus said that it wasn’t up to him to assign those places of honor.

Jesus never did say who would be sitting at his left and at his right in eternal glory. I wouldn’t be surprised to see Moses there. Mary, the mother of Jesus, would be a good candidate too, but so would you! Really? Could it be that one of you will be sitting right next to Jesus on Judgment Day? Sure. The way to forever-greatness is simple: be eager to serve. Jesus put it like this: “...those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

With a couple of verses Jesus destroys the world’s paradigm for greatness. The world says that you are great if you’re at the top and have a lot of people under you doing your bidding. Not so, explains Jesus. Those who are great are at the bottom serving and supporting everyone else. Retirees, you could just drive to church on a Sunday and leave. But you are willing to drive out of your way on a Sunday to pick up someone who can’t drive anymore and bring them to church. Volunteers are needed to help out with a soup supper during Advent and Lent. You willingly sign up a second time, even though you already are helping out with the small group you are involved in. Husbands, do you want to be the greatest marriage partner? Get in the habit of asking your spouse: “What can I do for you?” You’ll really prove your greatness when you ask that question right after coming off of a twelve-hour shift at work.

We’re usually open to serving those who are appreciative of our efforts but Jesus wants us to know that those who are really great serve even when there is no good reason to do so. Jesus himself sets the example. Our Savior said: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Although the title

“Son of Man” emphasizes that Jesus is true man and therefore humble, the title was first used in the Old Testament book of Daniel. There the Son of Man appears in God’s glorious presence and is given all authority and power. That awesome Son of Man was now making it clear to his disciples and to us that he did not think it was beneath him to give his life to save sinners. What Jesus did is not the same as a father giving up his life to save his children from a burning car. It’s like a father giving up his life to save the drunk driver who recklessly killed the father’s children in a horrific crash. Would you save and serve a scoundrel like that?

That’s exactly what Jesus calls us to do if we want to be forever great. He wants us to dive into opportunities of service no matter what time of day it is or who it is that needs our help. A true servant doesn’t ask: “What will I get out of this?” Or say, “I guess I’ll do it because no one else will.” A true servant also humbly responds when praised for his work: “I am an unworthy servant and am only doing what I am supposed to do.” (Luke 17:10)

So how great are you? I find that I’m great at keeping score of how many times I have served and others haven’t. I’m great at getting the job done with a smile on my face while my heart grumbles. In other words I am the one for whom the Son of Man gave his life as a ransom. My selfishness is not just bad form; it’s damning and needs forgiving. That’s what Jesus came to do: to earn forgiveness. What is our reaction to this self-sacrificing love? The following illustration will provide the answer.

On the southern border of the ancient Persian empire of Cyrus, there lived a great chieftain named Cagular. He regularly tore to shreds army detachments sent to subdue him. Finally, the emperor, amassing his whole army, surrounded Cagular and captured him. He and his family were brought to the capital for execution. On the day the sentence was to be carried out, Cyrus decided to have a little fun with the rebel chieftain. He asked Cagular, “What would you be willing to do for me to spare the life of your wife? How low would you stoop?” “Your Majesty,” Cagular answered, “if you spared my wife, I would die for you.” So moved was the emperor that he freed both Cagular and his wife.

Upon arriving home, Cagular reminisced about the trip with his wife. “Did you notice the marble at the entrance of the palace? Did you see the tapestry on the wall as we went down the corridor into the throne room? And did you get a good look at the throne on which the emperor sat? It must have been carved from one lump of gold!” His wife could appreciate her husband’s excitement and how impressed he was with it all, but she only replied: “I really didn’t notice any of that.” “Well,” said Cagular in amazement, “what did you see?” She turned to face her husband and whispered: “I beheld only the face of the man who said he would die for me.”

Friends, we have come here this morning to get a better look at the face of the one who was willing to die for us. We’re taking 60 minutes to forget the marble floors and the tapestries of this world. We’ve shut out the cares from the hectic week so we can look into the eyes of the God-man who was willing to sacrifice his own life to save us from our sin. (Illustration adapted from “The Love of God” by John Redpath) There can only be one fitting reaction to this self-sacrificing love: to reflect it to others by gladly serving them.

But Jesus also wants us to understand this morning that serving others won’t make our life any easier. He asked James and John in our text: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38) Jesus was about to be plunged into the deep sorrow and pain of dying on the cross. This bitter cup was almost at his lips. This was

the thanks he would receive for healing the blind and for raising the dead. Were James and John ready to suffer similar ingratitude for serving others? Are you? This is also the way to forever-greatness: being ready to suffer.

James and John both did suffer for their Christian service. James was killed by a King Herod – the first of the Twelve Disciples to die for the faith. According to church tradition, John was dunked in a pot of boiling oil but when nothing happened the emperor banished him to an island in the Mediterranean. I don't know about the pot of oil but the Bible does say that John was exiled to the island of Patmos and it wouldn't have been to spend time on the beach. John no doubt had been sentenced to hard labor.

Are you ready to be treated like that for serving others in Christian love? We said we were when we joined this church. And yet how quickly we become angry when reminded to serve our spouse, our parents, or our siblings who don't always seem to deserve that kind of treatment. No, they might not deserve it but neither did we deserve Jesus' servant-like love when he gave his life on the cross. It's only by pondering this love for us that we will continue to show servant-like love to others even when we're suffering for it.

When the other disciples heard what James and John had requested, they became angry and thereby showed themselves to be as guilty of the sin of pride as the two brothers were. "When the ten heard it they became indignant with James and John." Selfish people have a way of making you angry, sometime even very angry. Picture yourself in the Florida panhandle after Hurricane Michael, waiting in line for hours to get fuel for your car. Just as you are ready to drive up to the pump, someone drives their car in off the street and cuts ahead of you. At that point your anger level reaches ten on the anger meter. Remember the Monopoly game when you landed on Boardwalk where your brother had hotels and you had to shell out hundreds of dollars in rent. He gloated over beating you and felt like throwing down your cards and walking away from the game. Selfishness in others has a way of causing anger and selfishness to grow in us. Has someone ever selfishly hurt your feelings in your Christian family or even in your church? You had to pray continuously to have the strength not to hurt the person who hurt you?

Jesus sees the flashes of anger in the eyes of his disciples. He calls them together for a huddle to give them an important lesson in not thinking so much about themselves. He wants to teach them to serve just as he has served us. We need Jesus to remind us that true greatness in his kingdom comes with serving. If we want to be forever great, we'll be eager to serve and ready to suffer – just as Jesus did for us to forgive sin and give us heaven. And because of that Jesus is forever great and forever worthy of our praise. Amen.