

try to push others down until you're the last one standing. Or you can flip the pyramid upside down, put yourself at the bottom, and spend your life raising others up. Do you see the difference? You can look around and think of who should be helping you, who should be talking to you, who should be caring about you, who should be kind to you. Or you can spend your life looking around and seeing whom you can help, whom you can talk to, whom you can care about, whom you can be kind to.

That's what Jesus did, and so much more. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* Jesus showed his true greatness when he did what no one else would have been willing to do: He died for other people's sins. For Jesus leaving heaven to come to earth wasn't enough. He wanted to die. But even dying wasn't enough. He wanted to die for every sinful person. He made himself the littlest, lowest person in the world. He put himself below every single person and every single sin and carried them to his cross. So that even the murderer next to him was mocking Jesus. All to forgive you and me.

Our Savior's whole life revolves around us. Jesus spent his whole life living for you as your servant. Jesus sacrificed himself as the payment for your sins. One selfish thought at any part of the process would have stopped it all. One thought about what was best for him would have changed everything. But he wasn't thinking about what was best for him. The only ones he thought about were me and you. This is whom we follow: A Savior who was willing to make himself little in order to lift up even the lowest of people with his death on the cross.

So do you want to be great? You already are. Jesus has valued you so highly that he gave his life for you. You can't get any greater than that! So now you can live your life for others just like Jesus lived for you. Don't tear down, don't push down, don't look down. Get down and be willing to be little. Let others be above you. Let their needs come before yours. Let their spiritual good come before your personal preferences. Think about "them" instead of "I." And then get down and help others up. This is how things work in God's kingdom! Our battle every day is to beat down the selfishness in us and find in Jesus the strength to live a life in service of others.

Sound hard? It is. It was for James and John and their mother. And it will be for you. But you are Christians. You know the love of Jesus. You know that Jesus is thinking about you and your good every second of every day. And he changes selfish sinners into selfless servants. He used James and John to spread his Word all over the world. And he's going to use you too. Just don't be afraid to be little. Because no matter how low you go—no matter how much you humble yourself to serve others—Jesus will still be below you, holding you up. And when you need help, come back to Jesus and his cross. Lay your sins at his feet. A great person is willing to be little.

"Dear Jesus, you gave your life for me. Let me be your humble servant." Amen.

Matthew 20:17-28
Rev. Nathan Nass

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 30, 2013

¹⁷ Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, 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." ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Great People Are Willing to Be Little

It might not sound nice, but we need to start out today with a warning. Our lesson today is one of the parts of God's Word that make it hard to be Christians. I want you to be aware of that! What Jesus says today goes against what comes naturally to us. So that makes it extra important for us to hear. Today God's Word is going to tell us some things that we need to change in our lives.

It has to do with what it means to be great. Now maybe you don't feel a burning desire to be great, but we all have a desire to feel important. To be special in some way. To stand out from the crowd. And today we're going to call that feeling "greatness." So what does it mean to be great? Well, what do "great" people have in common? The great ones are the ones with the trophies, right? The awards. The big offices. To be great is to have your voice heard. To have people listen to you. To be the one making the decisions. To win against your opponents. To not take "no" for an answer. To not let anyone step on you. Greatness is often compared with a pyramid. Those who make it to the top—in sports, in elections, in business, in life—are great.

But not in Jesus' world. He looks at you and me, and he says, *"Not so with you!"* In Jesus' world, being great is something different than what we have come to expect. Actual-

ly, his full words are: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”* Jesus takes our normal idea of greatness and turns it on its head. He flips the pyramid upside down. Greatness in Jesus’ eyes is not being the one on top with everyone serving you. Greatness is being willing to be the one on the bottom serving everyone else. In Jesus’ eyes, a great person is always willing to be little.

If you want proof of that, look at Jesus. You are here today because you believe that Jesus is the greatest person in the history of the world. So great that 2000 years later he is still relevant, still powerful, still worth trusting and honoring and praising. So what was Jesus’ idea of greatness? He said, *“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life.”*

It’s been said that if you really want to know someone, ask them their dreams. Dreams can tell you a lot about a person. How driven they are. What their priorities are. Here were Jesus’ life dreams: Be flogged and mocked and crucified. Who dreams of that? Those don’t sound like the dreams of a great person! Those sound like the dreams of a loser. Of someone who didn’t have what it took to make it to the top. Unless you see greatness from God’s perspective. Jesus is the greatest person we know, and yet Jesus’ dream was to give up his throne in heaven, become a poor human being, and die on a cross. In God’s kingdom, great people are willing to be little.

But that’s hard! When Jesus was done sharing his selfless plans, the mother of James and John went to Jesus and asked: *“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”* Can you hear Jesus sigh? He must have sighed a lot! Jesus said, “I am going to die for everybody.” And they said, “Hey, we want first dibs on the best spots in heaven!” His attitude and the attitude of this mother and her sons could not have been more different. They took worldly ideas about greatness and applied them to God’s kingdom. And that doesn’t work! Jesus was thinking about others. They were thinking about themselves.

These were not “bad” people. You know James and John. Their mother’s name was Salome. She was one of the faithful women who stood at the foot of Jesus’ cross. She was one of the faithful women who went to Jesus’ tomb early on Easter morning. And right now she wanted to make sure that her two boys were going to be in heaven. That’s a great thing, right? But mixed with that wonderful desire was selfishness. She wanted them to have the best spots in heaven, because she thought that made them great. Even faithful believers can be selfish! You can be thinking spiritually but still be thinking selfishly.

And the rest of the disciples weren’t any different. *“When the ten heard about this,*

they were indignant with the two brothers.” The other ten disciples were thinking, “Man, we wanted the best seats in heaven. I knew I should have called it!” Often when we are concerned about someone else’s selfishness, it’s because we selfishly want exactly what they have. We criticize others so that we can look better. Jesus was on his way down to the bottom—to the cross—to lift the world up, while his disciples were pushing each other down as they fought to get to the top.

And even with all the advances of the last 2000 years, one thing hasn’t changed. We still see selfishness in us. Actually, we still see selfishness in the people around us. Because we never actually think that we’re selfish. Selfishness is the most natural sin there is. It feels natural to put ourselves first. It feels natural to complain about what others should be doing to make our lives better. Selfishness doesn’t feel wrong at all. But that doesn’t make it okay! It makes it that much harder to control. We often don’t even notice when we’re selfishly putting ourselves first.

Let me give you one example. I completed my taxes this past week. By God’s grace—if I did them right!—we’ll be getting a refund. So what do you think popped into my head the moment I realized we were getting a refund? A wheelbarrow. And a retaining wall for our driveway. A mattress for the guest room. Some jeans. The first thing that came to mind was me. And it felt so natural. I didn’t think about others. I didn’t think about giving back to God. I thought about me.

And this selfishness is bad enough when we keep it inside, but it can hurt our church too, just like it hurt the relationships between Jesus’ disciples. We usually get along pretty well, until it’s time for a new decision to be made, and then the “I”s start popping out. I don’t like. I prefer. I’m used to. I’ve always done. I want. I don’t like. I don’t think. I won’t give my money unless... Remember, you can be thinking spiritual thoughts, but still be thinking selfishly. Jesus’ decisions weren’t made for “I”. They were made for “them.” But the disciples couldn’t get past thinking about “me.” Because they had this idea running through their heads: Greatness comes from putting yourself first. From making your voice be heard. From not letting anybody step on you...

And Jesus said, *“Not so with you!” “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”* This “the whole world ought to revolve around me” syndrome is how many people live. But no so with you! We follow a great leader who went about life in a totally different way. If you want to live your life for you, then don’t pretend to follow Jesus. I told you that this is hard! It’s not easy being everyone else’s servant. But in Jesus’ eyes great people are willing to be little.

We talked about greatness being a pyramid. And you have two options. You can make your life a quest to get to the top so you can look down on everybody else. You can