

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

August 2, 2015



Discussion Guide

Be Great Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Would you say that it is true that everybody wants to be somebody? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Matthew 20.20-28 aloud, slowly. Encourage your group to imagine the scene unfold before their eyes. Read the text once more and provide time for your group to watch Jesus in this scene.
- In what ways do James and John seek to become somebodies?
- In what ways, if any, do you see the desire and actions of James and John in people today? In what ways are people seeking to become somebody?
- Read Matthew 20.20-28 once more, paying close attention to Jesus.
- What does Jesus have to say about becoming a somebody?
- In what ways is what Jesus says similar or dissimilar to how people are seeking to become somebodies?
- Jesus offers his own life as an example of what it takes to become great. Do you find it easy or difficult to take up this "Jesus life" as a path to becoming great? Could you elaborate?

- In today's sermon, the presence of pride (the pleasure and pursuit of having more than the next guy) was offered as a significant roadblock and humility as the most significant catalyst to taking up Jesus' life of service. Would you agree or disagree? Could you explain?
- Conclude your time as a group confessing your heart's desire to be great and the various paths you have followed to achieve this greatness. Ask for God's heart and his guidance as a group and as individuals in satisfying this desire.

Context and Background

Pride

Pride is typically defined as the presence of an inordinate amount of self-esteem, whether held in one's own mind or displayed in conduct aimed at making one appear to be superior to others. However, at its root, pride is simply the pleasure and pursuit of having more than the next guy, whatever that "more" might be. Thus, pride involves any desires and actions to exalt oneself over another.

Pride has a long history, perhaps being the first sin, leading to Satan's downfall (Ezekiel 28.17; 1 Timothy 3.6) and the sin which led to the destruction of Sodom (Ezekiel 16.49). Pride is therefore a sinful attitude, one which God actively resists (Proverbs 6.17; 16.5; James 4.6). God's stance against pride might be viewed as stemming from the very nature of pride, a nature which seeks exaltation, even above God. However, one might also understand God to oppose pride because of the negative effect it has upon life as God meant it to be lived, particularly within relationships. Pride deceives the heart (Jeremiah 49.16) and hardens the mind (Daniel 5.20), but primarily pride leads to contention within relationships and therefore their destruction (Proverbs 13.10; 28.25).

The opposite of pride is humility which might be defined as the practice of self-forgetfulness. In contrast with pride, humility is an attitude which leads one to exalt and serve another rather than self. The attitude (virtue) of humility is one found in the life of Christ (Philippians 2.8) and is therefore to be found among those who follow him (Philippians 2.5).

The Text

Matthew 20.20-28: Seeking to be great

The setting of Jesus' dialogue with James, John, and their mother occurs as Jesus and his disciples near the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus has just predicted his death by crucifixion for the third time along with his promise of resurrection (Matthew 20.17-20). While the disciples certainly did not understand the fullness of what Jesus was saying, some clearly understood Jesus to be claiming that the events in Jerusalem would lead to a new dynamic of God's coming Kingdom, a dynamic which would involve Jesus' exaltation as the leader of that Kingdom.

Within the context of the proclamation of this new dynamic and Jesus' role, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus with a request. She desires that Jesus install her sons into the two most prominent positions of power and authority within the Kingdom Jesus will rule. On the surface, it appears that she simply wants the best for her children, and is not beneath working for it. Perhaps this is the biblical version of the modern "Helicopter Parent." However, there is more going on than at first appears. Jesus responds not to this woman but to her two sons, indicating that he understands James and John to have set their mother up to making the request. This is not so much a mother's heartfelt desire as it is a strategic power play by James and John.

Rather than directly answering the request, Jesus questions the brothers about their ability to drink his cup, an Old Testament metaphor for the experience of God's wrath (Psalm 75.8; Isaiah 51.17). With this question Jesus highlights an important element of the coming Kingdom of God and Jesus' role within it. The path to that Kingdom is marked with much suffering. James and John affirm they can take anything Jesus can take when it comes to suffering, and Jesus affirms that the brothers would suffer, but these two prominent positions were to be appointed by the Father, not Jesus. They could not be gotten by the means the two brothers were taking. Power plays do not obtain power in God's Kingdom! Sometime later, perhaps shortly after this discussion, the rest of the disciples become aware of the actions of James and John and are incensed. Whether they are incensed because of the actions or the realization that they didn't act first is not made plain! What is plain is that the power play of James and John has brought about division within Jesus' disciples. Something about the brothers' grab for power and position has had a negative impact on the unity Jesus desired for his disciples (John 17.20-23).

Therefore, Jesus takes time to explain what has gone wrong and to draw his disciples back into relationship with one another.

Jesus acknowledges that the desire for power and position is common in the world and that such are used to push others down. Here Jesus acknowledges what has gone awry. The grasping for power and position in a worldly manner comes only at the expense of pushing others down, therefore straining relationships. However, this behavior was not to be found among those following Jesus. Jesus' followers could desire to be great people. However, Jesus redefines the path to greatness as service. Jesus' acknowledgement of the desire to be great affirms this innate desire as good and from God, perhaps rooted in the image of a great God (Genesis 1.26-28). However, the path to greatness is exemplified in Jesus' own life, a life of giving and serving for others. His whole life and ministry upon the cross serve as the path to greatness for his followers: service!

Matthew 23.5-12: A little respect, please!

Jesus is quite clear that greatness is found in service and that his life of service should be the model taken up by his disciples. However, this manner of life is difficult. People naturally desire to be great and they seek this greatness, not just in positions and roles with power, but in respect and titles. In a discussion concerning the heart of the Pharisees, Jesus notes that their religious behavior is driven by a desire to be seen; that is, their religious behavior is motivated by a desire for a specific response from people! The Pharisees wore oversized phylacteries (the practice of wearing leather boxes containing Scriptures based upon a literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 6.6-8) and tassels on their shawls which functioned much like modern day rosary beads. The Pharisees were seeking to appear religious so they would be recognized and given honorary positions and titles. In fact, Rabbinic tradition in Jesus' day had developed a practice of less informed people having to initiate a conversation with one more knowledgeable about the Torah, thus admitting their lower status. Simply put, the Pharisees desired to be noticed as great.

Jesus does not deny the desire to be great. In fact, he affirms this desire. What he denies is the pursuit of greatness through titles and honor. The use of such titles is not wrong, but often these titles are used to set people apart, something Jesus decries. Rather, Jesus affirms the pursuit of greatness through service.

Real life with Blake:

I want to be great! I want to be a somebody. I haven't met anyone who doesn't. Everybody desires to be somebody, a somebody people notice and respect, a somebody who makes a lasting difference. The big question is how do we do it? Better yet. How do I do it? How do I become great? I have tried a number of ways. I tried the knowledge route, obtaining a string of degrees and the titles that go along with them. I have tried the power and position route, seeking to place myself in roles where I can call the shots. I have tried the performance route, doing the right things at the right times so people will see and declare me to be who I desire to be, a somebody. To be honest, all that I have received is heartache and fractured relationships. None of it, absolutely none of it has gotten me what I want most. I am left wanting, wanting to be great. For some time I thought that perhaps I could not be what I desire to be, that maybe it was even "wrong" and "unspiritual" to desire to be great. I am learning that the problem isn't in my desire but in the way I am going about seeking the fulfillment of my desire. The desire to be great is from God, part of his image working out in me. My path to greatness. . .well. . .that has been less than from God. Jesus was the greatest man who ever lived and he achieved greatness through service. Somehow Jesus' life has not been good enough for me, but what if Jesus' life is the only path to what I most desire? I am discovering that Jesus' life is meant to be the life I live and thus the path to greatness is pretty clear. Greatness takes service.

Real life with you:

We all want to be great. Everybody wants to be somebody. It is part of God's working out in and through us. However, the path to greatness is often difficult to ascertain. According to Jesus, the only way to achieve greatness is to develop an ambition to serve. Greatness is not found in climbing the corporate ladder or in landing that perfect next thing. Greatness is found in stepping down and serving. Greatness is found in taking up the Jesus life, but many of us find this difficult. Something about stepping down grates against our sensibilities. The problem is not in our desire to be great but in the presence of something else within us. That something is pride. Pride is our desire to pleasure in and pursue having more than the next guy. When our pride mixes with our God-given desire to be great, we create a devastating concoction which destroys us and those closest to us. If we are to live the Jesus life of service we must develop the heart of Jesus, a heart full not of pride but of humility, the practice of self-forgetfulness. Humility mixes with our God-given desire for greatness and sets us squarely in the path which leads us there, service. But how does one cultivate a humble heart? The key is in the term "cultivate." This week we encourage you to begin opening your heart to God's gracious work by offering a very simple prayer, "Create in me a humble heart." Seek to approach God with this prayer as often as you call it to mind, even allowing it to become something of an ongoing conversation with God, your own prayer without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5.17). Allow God to have access to your heart by offering yourself to him in this way, and allow him to begin to do what only he can do, leading you to the life he has always meant for us.



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