

THE BON AIR PULPIT

James D. Pardue, Pastor

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Sermon: *The Spirit of Servant Hood*

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 20:20-28*

I want you to eavesdrop on a mother talking to her two young adult sons. "Boys, don't you understand the wonderful opportunity that is yours? You are on the inside group, and the Kingdom that our ancestors had looked forward to for all of these years is about to come. This is your opportunity. You can be at the very top of the power structure of the Kingdom. Why, one of you could sit on the right hand. One of you could sit on the left. One could be in charge of personnel. One could be in charge of programs. But unless you push, you are going to get left out. I know that you don't want to step over anybody, but if you don't speak for yourself, nobody is going to speak for you. Some of these others are going to go right pass you and get these places of authority and power. I want to ask you boys, are you going to take your mother's advice and do anything about it? Well, if you boys don't, if you boys are too timid, mama will speak for you." Then the mother came with her two sons and knelt down and ask him a favor. "What is it you want," Jesus asked. She had, "Grant that these two sons of mine, one may sit on your right hand and one may sit on your left in your Kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink of?" "Yes, we can." Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at the right hand or the left is not mine to grant. Those places belong to those who have been prepared by my Father." When

the ten other disciples heard it, they were indignant with the brothers, and Jesus said this is a good time to call an executive session of the apostles. Jesus said to them, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over others, and their high officials exercise authority over them. It is not to be this way with you. Whosoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whosoever wants to be first must be your slave. Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many."

The question that Salome asked of Jesus for James and John gave Jesus the opportunity to define one of the most important concepts in our life. The concept is what is success. You understand that if you don't have a proper definition of that term, you can be successful and realize that you have been a failure. The little line that is going around today you can get to the top of the ladder and realize that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. One of the most critical times in your life may be when you think you are successful. In fact, sometimes success is a lot more dangerous than failure, because when you become successful in your eyes, you may think that you don't need God so you become a functional atheist. You certainly don't need others. You have made it by yourself. And it may get to the place where really what you do is cut yourself off from others. How tragic it would be to give all of your life to some goals and ambitions in your life, and then to recognize that they are not what God meant for you to do.

So Jesus turned and said this is the moment. Let me tell you what real success is, and He did it by the way of contrast. He said let me tell you what the world teaches you. Then let me tell you what I have come to teach you. What the world teaches you is you climb to the top, and power and authority is what you need to seek. Two of the great psychologists in the world's history were Carl Young and Alfred Aigler. Young said I can tell you what it is that motivates people. What

motivates people is authority. Everybody wants somebody to boss. Everybody wants to be at the head. Everybody wants to be at the top. Aigler said what everybody wants is recognition. They want to be able to speak and people will pay attention to what they say. So it is that someone has said they can tell you what the world's beatitudes are: blessed are the pushers for they shall get ahead. Blessed are the hard-boiled for they never let life hurt them. Blessed are the complainers for they always get their way. Blessed are the blasé; they never have to worry when they do things wrong. Blessed are the slave drivers; they get their way. Blessed are the knowledgeable; they know the ways to get things accomplished. Jesus said if you want to know what the world tells you is important, it is power and position and possessions. So you sit down and say am I in charge? Do people recognize me? Let me check my bank account, and I can tell you whether I am a success or not.

Last year Queen Elizabeth came to visit America. She brought with her 4,000 lbs. of luggage. She had two outfits for every event, and she even had an outfit if anybody died, she had a mourning outfit in her luggage. She had kid leather toilet seat covers. She had a hair dresser, two valets, a private doctor, twelve pints of plasma, and twelve bodyguards plus all of the people in authority. The Queen has arrived. That is the world's way of saying that is success.

Jesus turned and he said, "But, I want to tell you another way. I want to tell you that power and possessions and position are not all there is to life." He would say to us many of you may achieve that, but the question is what are you going to do after you get it. Do you get it just for yourself, just to satisfy your own ego, or is it a launching pad for you to have a lifestyle that is different from the world? The lifestyle that you must have is service. He said let me tell you what God says is success. God says success is have you committed your life to be a servant to others? He

said I want to tell you in two ways. First I want to model it for you, and then I want to tell you about it. You know when you look at the life of Jesus, the one thing he modeled was that position and power and prestige are not important. In fact, the Bible says you recall that He was at the right hand of God. He had everything God had. I can't even imagine all that He had. And the Bible says that what He did, He laid it all aside. He said this is not important to me. The Bible says that He came and humbled himself, and came in the form of a servant. You recall that when he was born they came looking for him. They said where is he that is born King of the Jews? They went to the palace. They said he is not here. You remember that they found him out with the cattle. They found him out in a barn. That's where he was born.

When he was eight years of age, his mother and daddy took him to dedicate him to God. In the Old Testament it tells you according to your wealth what you are to bring when you dedicate your child to God. If you are very wealthy, you bring certain things. But it goes all the way down the list, and if you are so poor and have nothing to bring then all that you can bring are two doves. When Jesus was dedicated, that's what Mary and Joseph brought; two doves. He was raised in a little town called Nazareth. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, lists all of the places in Galilee, 227 villages. Nazareth is not even in the list. He was raised in Podunk. They said about him. He can't be the messiah. He came from Nazareth. They looked down their nose. The wrong side of the track. You remember he even confound John the Baptist. Standing in line. John went to him. He said get out of line. I ought to be baptized by you. Jesus said I am going to stand in line. I want to identify myself with a hurting, broken people of the world. You remember they

came to him one day and said pay your tax. He said I don't have any money to pay my tax. You recall that he caught a fish, and in the fish there was a coin. With the coin he paid his taxes. When he died, he died on a cross, the most shameful symbol the world has ever known of brokenness and defeat. At the foot of the cross there were a couple of fellows gambling for the only thing he had that was worthwhile, that was an outer garment. He never had a home. He never went on a vacation. He didn't have anything to leave for his family. Yet when you got up this morning and read the morning newspaper, it said 1998. That is the year of our Lord, the year that He was born. And all of us recognize that He was the greatest man who ever lived. Someone said you want to know how great He is, why do people curse about? You don't get mad and say, "Oh, Napoleon!" Even here in Virginia when you get mad, you don't say, "Oh, Thomas Jefferson!" What's the word that even comes out in your cursing? Jesus! Why is he successful? Son of man came not to be served but to serve.

Preachers know the name Henry Nowen. He was a professor of religion at Harvard. His books have been read by most preachers around the world. One day Dr. Nowen went in to see the president. He said I would like a leave of absence from my teaching profession. He said, oh, are you going to write? He said, no. He said I want to take another job for a while. He said where are you going? He said I am going to Toronto. What are you going to do? I am going to an orderly in a home for retarded adults. The same brilliant, genius Dr. Nowen became an orderly to Jack who was incontinent and could not fee himself. One day Dr. Philip Yancey of Northern Christian Writers went to Toronto and said what are you doing here? Dr. Nowen looked at him and asked don't you understand? I want to

understand my Lord. Do I understand Him best by writing or do I understand Him best by cleaning up after Jack. Dr. Nowen was going to come back to Harvard, but one day in cleaning up after Jack he had a heart attack and he died. What a waste. No, he said if I am to follow Him, I must understand more and more of what it means to be a servant. Many of us will never do all that Jesus did, and maybe you will never do what Dr. Nowen did but the question that keeps haunting all of us is do I have a servant spirit? Do I have an attitude that says what God has given me, I am go share that with others? Am I to ask if the world has a claim on me or my time and my energy and my possessions? When I hear or when I feel the world's pain, does it say to me I have got to do something about that? Christians ought to be more than just folk who care like everybody else. It ought to be deeper and broader and more sustained and more sacrificial than anything else that anybody else can do.

You might recall that at the very first of the Bible there were two brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain one day became very angry with Abel and killed him. God came to him and asked where is your brother? You remember the sarcastic question. Am I my brother's keeper? God said today I put a curse upon you. The curse of Cain is that you will wander the world, never know the joy of family, never know being a part of community, never being able to reach out and help. The curse of Cain is that you will only live in yourself. What a curse. Jesus came to remove the curse, and say this is what you are to do. You are to live in family, you are to live in community, you are to live in this world, and you are to be your brother's keeper.

So the question that you need to ask yourself is not who is in charge, but who can we help; not who is going to get the credit, but who can ease the pain; and not who can make the most money, but who can redeem the world's ills. Maybe the question then comes out of our scripture

today simply is who are you really playing out your life to? You are playing it out for yourself and your own ego, or are you playing it out for the world so that when it is all over, the world can say you are a success? Or do you want to play it out to God who says success is being a servant?

Years ago a deacon in our church and came to me. He said I have just come from the doctor. The doctor says I have cancer. The doctor says I have six months to live. He said I want to tell you the first thing that came to my mind. The first thing that came to my mind is my relationship to God. I remember a few years ago that they asked me at the church to teach some junior high boys, and I said I am too busy. He said it is amazing how the news that I got today will help you put things in order of their priority. Maybe the question that ought to keep haunting me is how really successful am I anyway?

My daughter went to a Baptist university in Birmingham, Alabama, Sanford University. I was down to visit her one time. I noticed the hills that surround Birmingham. On top of them is a huge stature. At the top of it was a flame. He was holding a flame in his hand. I asked what is that? He said don't you know? Birmingham is called the Pittsburgh of the south. It is known for its steel and its ironmills. So years ago there was erected the God of Fire. It symbolizes the industrial might of the city. I asked can I go up and see it? So we drove up to the top of the hill. I got out and saw that huge statute, the symbol of industrial power. I got ready to get in the car I noticed back to the side a little circular sidewalk. There was a life-size statute. I went over and looked at it. It was a man who was kneeling. His head was bowed. He had one hand raised. I asked who is that? They said that is Brother Bryan. Brother Bryan was one of those kind of people who anytime somebody was sick, he seemed to be there. Anytime they didn't have any food, he seemed to show up with canned goods. If they got burned out, he was there was a mattress. He used his money to help intercity kids

get an education. The citizens of Birmingham decided that when he died they would build a statute to him. What Jesus asked is what is the most important statute? Industrial might and wealth? The citizens of Birmingham said yes, but it must be balanced. It must be balanced with compassion and caring and sacrifice.

You are here today because you want to be better. You came today because you realize how very easy it is to get your priorities all mixed up and to live in a world that keeps hollering, hollering one thing. And you know you need to come and make sure you head is screwed on right. So hear it today. This is about the only place you will hear it. The servant attitude and spirit is the pathway to greatness. If you want to be great in the Kingdom, you will be the servant of all. Every Sunday I get up and ask people to come to faith in Jesus Christ. I ask you to do because if you listen to everything else that you hear it is wrong. It is wrong. You will end up on dead end streets. You will end up frustrated and defeated. You might realize that you gave your life to things that really don't matter. If you have never given your life to Christ, I urge you today to say He is the most important thing, and I give my life to Him. I ask you if you are a believer. I ask you to come and be a part of this church family because you see, this is what God has done. He has put us together that together we can make a difference in caring about the world's hurt and pain. I ask you to come and join us and be a part of this fellowship because I want you to be one of the hands and one of the caring hearts that reach out to others. I hope today that God has been working in your life, and that today you will want to make your decision for Him.