

Matthew: Whoever Would Be First

Discussion Guide for July 11 and 12, 2026

Summary

On the way to Jerusalem, the disciples James and John ask for the seats of highest honor in Jesus' coming kingdom (Matthew 20:17–28). Jesus uses the moment to teach all the His followers that His kingdom is upside-down from the world in relation to power and authority: kingdom citizens do not use their power to "lord it over" others; rather suffering for one's faith is honored, and true greatness comes through serving. The ultimate example is Jesus Himself — the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Ice Breaker

Think of a time you competed for something — a seat, a spot on a team, a promotion, or even a parking space. What did you do to try to win it? Looking back, how much did winning (or losing) actually matter?

Key Verses

1. Matthew 20:17–28
2. 1 Peter 5:2–3

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus told His disciples three separate times exactly what would happen in Jerusalem — His arrest, death, and resurrection — both to prepare them and to give them hope. When you face difficult seasons, how does knowing "how the story ends" in Christ change the way you walk through them?
2. James and John (with their mother's help) asked for the seats of highest honor in the kingdom. Where do you find yourself competing for recognition, position, or honor — at work, at church, at home, or online? What does that competition reveal about what you believe brings greatness?
3. Jesus said the seats of honor require drinking a "cup" of suffering, and the early church actually rejoiced when they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5). Why is suffering for one's faith so honored in the kingdom, and so foreign to the way the world thinks? Have you ever experienced a cost — lost relationships, popularity, or opportunities — because of your faith?
4. Jesus warned against having power and "lording it over" others the way Gentiles with power do. The sermon noted that having power is not the problem — using power to put people in their place or elevate yourself is. What power or authority has God given you

(as a parent, boss, leader, teacher, or friend), and how are you tempted to use it for yourself rather than to serve?

5. Jesus distinguished between a diakonos (a hired servant who chooses when to serve) and a doulos (a slave whose whole identity is service). Which mindset more accurately describes your posture toward serving? What would need to change to move from one to the other?

6. Jesus came "not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Like Father Damien, who left safety to live among the lepers of Molokai, Jesus stepped down from His seat of glory and into our condition to heal us. How does remembering what Jesus exchanged for you reshape your motivation to serve others?

Life Application

This week, look for one concrete way to use whatever power, position, or influence you have to serve someone rather than to be served — at home, at work, at school, or in the church. Consider stepping into a place of service in the body of Christ. As you serve, remember Jesus' words: whoever would be first must be a slave of all — and every act of service is a vote for the Kingdom of Heaven over the kingdom of self.

Key Takeaways

1. Jesus came to earth for one primary purpose: to die for sin and conquer death — the story of Passover week ends with resurrection, and that is our hope.
2. Suffering is honored in the kingdom — when we suffer well because of our faith, we do not run from it or grow discouraged; we put the worth of Jesus on display for a watching world.
3. God's people do not use power to elevate themselves above others — we use whatever authority God gives us to shepherd, protect, and serve those entrusted to us.
4. Greatness in the kingdom is upside-down from the world: to be great is to be a servant, and to be first is to be a slave. Service is the kingdom way of life, not an occasional choice.
5. When we serve others, we resemble Jesus and reflect the gospel — the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.