

# How To Become The Greatest

I remember walking outside one summer night to put the trash in the trash cans. As I walked along the front of the house and turned the corner toward the trash cans, I heard a rattlesnake shaking his rattle. Instantly, I knew that familiar sound because we live on what the neighbors call “rattlesnake row.” We have heard rattlesnakes many times. But this time I did not see it in the dark. I only heard it from the among the rocks some feet away. I knew it was close because it sensed my presence. Pride is like a dangerous snake in the dark of night. Usually, you cannot see it, but it is there. It is most easily recognized in children. Almost every parent has heard their children demand that someone return a toy or some food with the scream, “Give it to me. It is mine!” The child unknowingly embarrassed himself or herself by revealing that they think they are more important than everyone else. The sad part about pride is that as a person becomes older, we try to hide our pride. Pride hides itself. Children are not like snakes in the dark, but adults are because they endeavor to hide their pride. Pride motivates many people to serve the Lord Jesus. They want a sense of importance. Maybe they do not want to waste their life. But when a adult’s pride is offended, they strike with fangs. Pride can motivate and destroy relationships and organizations. Pride is a sin that should not exist in the life of a believer. Our study is about pride and is from Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45.

**A Mother and Her Two Sons.** Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 describe the next event after Jesus told His disciples they were going to Jerusalem where He would be killed. Only Matthew and Mark record the event. It is a sad event since the pride of the disciples can be seen once again.

Earlier as they walked to Capernaum, the disciples had argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 9:33-34; Luke 9:46-47). So, the disciples asked Jesus who among them would be the greatest in the kingdom. They

were confident that one of them would be the greatest. They had incredible pride, thinking that the list of potential can-

didates was limited to themselves. Jesus told them that it starts with becoming a believer. It begins with humility. No one will become a believer if they are not willing to become humble before God. They will admit they are sinners and repent of their sins. They will submit themselves to Christ.



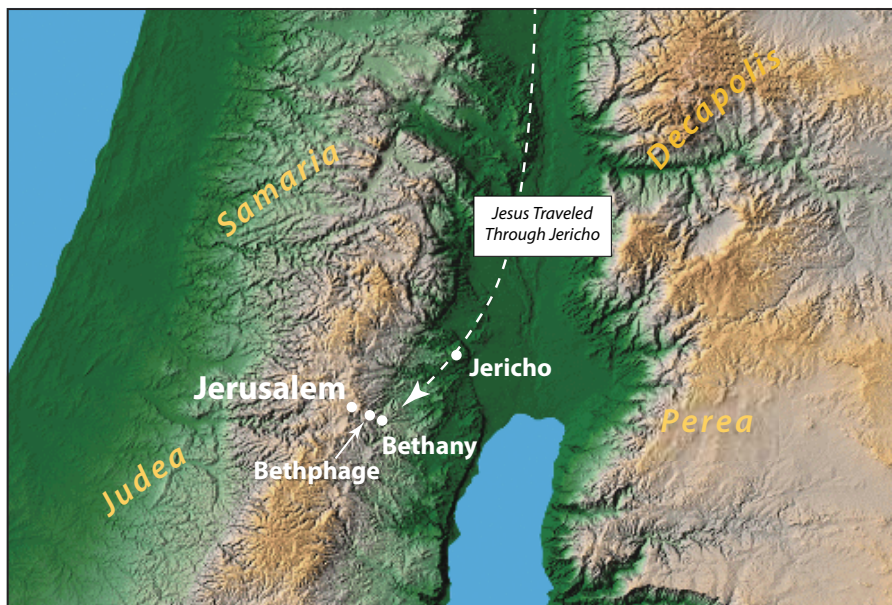
Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3-4

(NASB)

The greatest in the kingdom are those who are the most humble. One would think that after our Lord had taught them that truth, the desire to be the greatest would have disappeared. But the pride of the disciples was like the hidden rattlesnake in the dark. It was still there, it just was not visible. But in this study, their snake-like pride becomes visible again. The opening verses of our study are Matthew 20:20-21.

*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." Matthew 20:20-21 (NASB)*

Here we are told the mother of the two sons of Zebedee came to Jesus and asked a favor. Mark 10:35-37 provides more information and gives us the names of the two sons.



*James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, \*came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." Mark 10:35-37 (NASB)*

Her two sons were named James and John. We have read about them before. Initially, they were disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40) before they started following Jesus. Later, Jesus met them two times at the seashore of the Sea of Galilee because they were fishermen (Matthew 4:21-22; Mark 1:19; Luke 5:1-10). That suggests these two men were

hardworking and strong. They ran a successful business.

Mark 3:17 tells us that when Jesus made them disciples, He called them "Boanerges," which means, "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). That suggests they became angry quickly, and were immature. That fits with Luke 9:54 which says both brothers told Jesus that a village, which had rejected Him, should be destroyed with fire from heaven. Their attitude is not what we would expect from followers of Christ. This reveals the character of these men. They were strong, quick-tempered men, who were ready to defend Christ. The desire to defend Jesus was great, but the attitude was wrong.

Matthew 5:37-39 tells us that Jesus only allowed James, John, and Peter to accompany Him when He entered into

an official's house to heal his daughter. Jesus did not ask any other disciple. Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2 tell us that these two men were so highly favored that Jesus took them and Peter up to the Mount of Transfiguration. None of the other disciples were able to

join them. Later, we will learn that James, John, and Peter asked Jesus about the signs of the future, and He answered their request in private (Matthew 24:3; Mark 13:3). There was one more time when Jesus asked only James, John, and Peter to join Him. That was when He went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray before His arrest (Mark 14:32-35). All of these examples help us understand that these two men were favored. Jesus saw beyond their rough edges. He knew their great potential for the kingdom of God. So, they were part of Jesus' inner circle! They felt privileged. There were twelve disciples, but Jesus had chosen three of them for the inner circle: Peter, James, and John. Now that was a privileged position. It is not surprising that because of their personalities

coupled with a sense of privilege that they asked Jesus for a special favor.

Who was the mother of James and John? Matthew 20:20 just says that she was the mother of the sons of Zebedee. If we search the gospels we can discover her name. First, Matthew 27:55-56 tells us that many women were standing at a distance from the cross. One of the women was called Mary Magdalene. The second Mary was the mother of James and Joseph. Verse 56 says,

**Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Matthew 27:56 (NASB)**

Second, Matthew 10:2-4 says there were two disciples named James. One was the son of Zebedee, and the other James was the son of Alphaeus. Therefore, since the third woman mentioned in verse 56 is the mother of the sons of Zebedee, the second woman mentioned in verse 56 *must be* the wife of Alphaeus. Third, if we read Mark 15:40, we discover the name of the mother of the sons of Zebedee is Salome.

**There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. Mark 15:40 (NASB)**

So, Zebedee was the father of James and John, and Salome was the wife of their father. That is the family. It is also possible that Salome was Jesus' aunt (John 19:25). If that is true, then Salome is in a powerful position to make a special request of Jesus for her sons.

**Pride is Deceptive.** It is clear from Matthew 20:20-21 and Mark 10:35 that Salome, James, and John had planned to ask Jesus together for a special honor. But we are not told why they chose this time to make their request. We do not know anything about the location of this event. But it will become obvious that they spoke with Jesus a little distance away from the other disciples. They are a perfect illustration of pride. Pride deceives. They did not want any competition from the other disciples when they made their request. They

wanted to make their request first, and win "the prize" before the other disciples discovered what they had done. This gives us the first principle about pride. Pride is deceptive. Psalm 73:6 states that pride is like a necklace, a necklace of violence.

**Therefore pride is their necklace;  
The garment of violence covers them.  
Psalm 73:6 (NASB)**

In its deception pride hurts others. Pride is secretive in its quest for honor. It quietly slithers along in the grass like a snake.

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Salome, James, and John approached Jesus. But Matthew 20:20 leaves us with the impression that Salome bowed down before Jesus and asked, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." In sharp contrast, Mark 10:35 gives us the impression that James and John made the request. More information about the timeline of this event would have been helpful so that we could understand who said what when, but the record does not tell us. Since Scripture was written by God the Holy Spirit, we know that both Matthew and Mark accurately recorded what happened. It is clear that Salome, James and John made this request of Jesus together! There can be no contradiction in those facts, but the order of who spoke when is not provided. It seems that perhaps Mark 10:35 describes what happened first.

**James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, \*came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." Mark 10:35 (NASB)**

The Greek tense for "saying" is a present participle, which refers to continuous action. This suggests they were asking as they approached Jesus. They were not timid but bold. They took the lead and were already speaking as they approached Jesus. They spoke first and asked, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." Mark 10:36-37 states that Jesus answered with, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right

# Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Perea - Winter of A.D. 33

|         | Ten Lepers Healed | Second Coming Prophesied | Parables On Prayer | Jesus On Divorce | Children In The Kingdom | Riches and The Kingdom | Owner & Laborers | 3rd Prophecy Death & Resurrection | Pride of Disciples | Blind Man Healed |
|---------|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Matthew |                   |                          |                    | 19:1-12          | 19:13-15                | 19:16-30               | 20:1-16          | 20:17-19                          | 20:20-28           | 20:29-34         |
| Mark    |                   |                          |                    | 10:1-12          | 10:13-16                | 10:17-31               |                  | 10:32-34                          | 10:35-45           | 10:46-52         |
| Luke    | 17:11-19          | 17:20-37                 | 18:1-14            |                  | 18:15-17                | 18:18-30               |                  | 18:31-34                          |                    | 18:35-43         |
| John    |                   |                          |                    |                  |                         |                        |                  |                                   |                    |                  |

and one on Your left, in Your glory.” That was a bold request.

Matthew 20:20-21a tells us that mom bowed down and made her request.

*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. Matthew 20:20 (NASB)*

It seems best to understand that she did not wait to hear Jesus’ reply to her sons or she made her request next. She quickly bowed down in order to add the weight of her request. Matthew 20:21 says, “And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.”

Together they made the same request of Jesus. If Salome was Jesus’ aunt, then the three of them must have believed that she had some extra influence. So, pride is deceptive.

**Pride Is Ambitious.** Matthew 20:22 and Mark 10:38-39a give us the second principle. Pride is ambitious. These verses tell us that Jesus answered them with,

*“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.” Matthew 20:22 (NASB)*

Mark 10:38 includes a phrase that Matthew does not include. He adds a statement about baptism.

*“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? They said to Him, “We are able.” Mark 10:38-39a (NASB)*

Jesus used the phrase “drink the cup that I drink” to refer to His own cup of suffering which He had just explained. He had just told them that they were going to Jerusalem, and there He would die and be resurrected (Matthew 20:18-19; Mark 10:33-34). While the disciples did not understand what He had said, at least He told them the truth. The cup He was going to drink was a cup of suffering. The expression “cup of” occurs about fifteen times in Scripture. Six times it has a positive meaning. But the other nine times it has a negative



meaning: cup of His anger (Isaiah 51:17; Revelation 14:10), cup of reeling (Isaiah 51:22), cup of the wine of wrath (Jeremiah 25:15; Revelation 16:19), cup of horror and desolation (Ezekiel 23:33); and the cup of demons (1 Corinthians 10:21).

So, Jesus replied to their question with a question. Could the two sons drink the cup of suffering that He was about to experience? Jesus was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. Boldly and without wisdom, they replied that they could drink the same cup. Pride is ambitious and aggressive. They said, “We are able.” Just like a snake.

Because these two men were ambitious, they believed they could do whatever it was to which Jesus was referring. They were the “Yes, we can do anything duo!” James 4:13-16 rebukes this second principle of pride.

**Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. James 4:13-16 (NASB)**

This passage captures the attitude that was missing in these young men. Oh, they said, “We are able.” We can do such and such! We can do it Jesus! They believed they could do whatever they desired. Often we hear politicians tell the people of a nation that they can do anything. James 4:16 says “all such boasting is evil.” Notice it does not say “some” but “all” such boasting is evil. James and John were displaying evil! They did not consider that God the Father might not want them to do that.

Frankly, there have been times that I have felt that I could do something and then the Lord has reminded me to ask Him if it is His will. Maybe you have failed to ask God what was His will, and just charged ahead assuming you would succeed. Pride deceives others and self, and becomes ambitious. It rarely considers the will of God. Are you careful to ask God if your plans are in conformity with His?

Then Jesus made this surprising statement to them,

**He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.” Matthew 20:23 (NASB)**

And Mark says,

**And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Mark 10:39b-40 (NASB)**

When Jesus told them they would drink His cup, He hinted that some day they would suffer. Acts 12:1-2 tells us that James did drink the cup of suffering when he was martyred for his faith with a sword. John drank the cup when he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). In time they suffered too!

But Jesus could not grant them the privilege of sitting on His right and left side. It was for God the Father who had made that decision already to make that decision. With that comment, the humility of Jesus is revealed. He was in total submission to the Father. The kingdom had been planned by God the Father from the foundation of the world (Matthew 24:34). the kingdom belonged to the Father (Matthew 26:29). Philippians 2:9-11 reveals that the Father will exalt Christ and give Him authority over all the nations of the world. Verse 10-11 say,

**... so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:10-11 (NASB)**

When the kingdom ends after one thousand years, Christ will hand control of the kingdom back to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24).

Notice that Jesus said what they wanted had already given away. Jesus said, “for whom it has been prepared.” The Greek word “prepared” is in the perfect tense. That refers to completed action in the past with continuing effect. That is, the Father had already made the decision. They had asked the wrong person. The Father did not make decisions based on someone’s personal ambitions and self-confidence.

So, Christ gave them the facts. That must have been disappointing. They had asked the wrong person for the positions they had ambitiously pursued. Has that ever happened to you? Have you embarrassed yourself by asking someone for something only to be told they could not help you? Have you ever after plotting and planning discovered that you had asked the wrong person?

**Pride Wants To Be First.** Now Matthew 20:24 tells us the other disciples heard the discussion. They were very upset.

*And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. Matthew 20:24 (NASB)*

The Greek word for indignant has the basic meaning of being very angry.

A strong word for angry resentment. In the papyri. The ten felt that James and John had taken advantage of their relation to Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The disciples were very angry because they wanted those two seats too! Their pride burst into flames on the inside. I wonder what words came out of their mouths. But neither Matthew or Mark tell us about any of their reactions. It is amazing that all of the disciples did not see their sin. They believed they had been wronged. The struggle to be first was simply a right. To be first was like finding a rabbit in the desert. Whoever could eat it first had the right to eat it. For them, the desire to have the position of first was neither a right or wrong. It was simply who could win the prize. They thought James and John had mistreated them. What the two

brothers had requested was a gift that belonged to them. Has that ever happened to you? Someone offended you because you wanted what they wanted, but they asked first and got it? Maybe it was just a silly piece of pie or the last scoop of ice cream. Maybe it was a position of leadership at work or church.

Proverbs 29:23 tells us about the consequences of pride.

*A man’s pride will bring him low,  
But a humble spirit will obtain honor. Proverbs 29:23  
(NASB)*

Even if the disciples did not say anything, Jesus knew their hearts and thoughts (Luke 11:17). James and John were brought low by their actions and the other ten disciples were brought low by their anger. Now the snake could be seen!

This was a sad and embarrassing situation within the team of disciples. The team had already argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom once before, and now the same issue occurred again in a different way! This time James and John wanted to secure the position of the greatest by a power-play. If they could just sit on the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom, then they would be greater than the other disciples. They thought this was the way to win! But, they failed. This was an embarrassment. The family was embarrassed.

How did Jesus feel about their pride? Job 40:11b-12a reveals how God responds to pride. God Himself repeats this statement twice.

*Look at everyone who is proud, and humble him. Job  
40:12a (NASB)*

The message is that God will humble the arrogant. Proverbs 16:5 says,

*Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to  
the LORD;  
Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.  
Proverbs 16:5 (NASB)*

Proverbs 16:19 adds,

1. A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 20:24.

It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly  
Than to divide the spoil with the proud.  
Proverbs 16:19 (NASB)

Isaiah 2:12 describes the Lord as a king leading His army against the proud.

For the LORD of armies will have a day of reckoning  
Against everyone who is proud and lofty  
And against everyone who is lifted up,  
That he may be abased.  
Isaiah 2:12 (NASB)

So, how did our God, Jesus Christ, respond to their pride? The next verse in both Matthew and Mark reveal that Jesus saw into their hearts. He responded with an open rebuke.

**Pride Seeks Total Control.** The next verse, Matthew 20:25 states,

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you.” Matthew 20:25 (NASB)

So, Jesus called them to Himself and began to rebuke them. He began by describing some characteristics of pride as revealed in the Gentile leaders. Another ugly truth about pride is that it seeks to control others. Ultimately, it does not want to be a team player. The Greek word that Jesus used for “lord it over” is *katakyrienuo*. In Acts 19:16 it is used of demons “subduing” some men. In 1 Peter 5:3 elders are warned to not have this attitude. This helps us understand that pride seeks to conquer and push other people down below the proud individual. That describes the two sons and their mother. It describes all of the disciples. It describes us!

Second, Jesus says that pride seeks to “exercise authority over.” The Greek word for this phrase is a strong word that describes tyrannical control. It wants total control. Sometimes we refer to people as “control-freaks.” That is pride on steroids. Jesus has just revealed their root problem. He did not

avoid their sin! Their sin was pride. Pride seeks total control. It is happiest when it is “lording over others.”

We can see that in our nations. Tyrants, dictators, politicians, moms and dads, and even our children want total control. Why? It is pride in its rawest form. Pride is brutal in its purest form. The disciples were struggling with it, and they had lost several battles so far. In God’s kingdom, pride will not be tolerated. Isaiah 14:12-14 reveals that Satan was filled with pride. Consequently, he wanted to replace God. Ultimately, his pride motivated him to seek to replace God and become God. He failed. The creature wanting to become God over his Creator and true God. That was not wise! Do you want control?

**How To Be Great.** So, pride is deceptive, ambitious, wants to be first, and seeks total control. Pride is the core sin that we have inherited from the first parents Adam and Eve. So, Jesus rebuked them for their sin and then He gave them an important principle. Jesus told them how they could become great, *megas*.

But whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant. Matthew 20:26 (NASB)

Jesus said the one among them who was great, was the one who was the servant among them. The Greek word that Jesus used for servant is *diakonos*. The word can refer to a servant in a house. The word has the idea of one who renders service.

If you respond positively to Jesus’ statement, then that is your first step toward becoming great within your group, whatever group that is. Many church leaders hear this principle and respond positively. But frankly, it is the rare group of church leaders who actually put it into practice. When they are in the midst of making decisions, there is always one or two who act like James and John. The serpent is in the room! The memory of the principle quickly flies away like a bird. In the context of the church, we should turn the organization chart upside down. The leaders are the real servants who should be laboring hard in Word and doctrine. They are to serve the congregation by working hard at preparing to teach and then in teaching. The rest of the church should labor hard in using their spiritual gifts so that they can effectively

minister to fellow believers. The same is true in the home. When each member of a household labors hard in their God-assigned responsibilities, they are the great ones.

The ones who remember this principle and put it into practice are the great ones in God's eyes (speaking figuratively)! That must have been a shock to the disciples, for that was not their idea of how to become great.

**How to Be Great.** Then Jesus reached His high point.

*And whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Matthew 20:27 (NASB)*

The Greek word He used for slave in verse 27 is *doulos*. The word refers to a literal slave, someone who takes orders from other people. Jesus gave a wonderful definition of humility! This seems to be a strange definition to us. We usually think humility "is thinking less about ourselves." But that is not a biblical definition of humility. Jesus gradually prepared them and us for His definition by describing the Gentiles, and then telling us the great are servants, and now those who are first are slaves. His definition of humility is being the slave for others. Oh, we do not like the idea of slavery! Pride does not like the idea. So, we consider it bad.

Satan is an illustration of pride. Isaiah 14:13-14 describes Satan's thoughts.

*But you said in your heart,  
"I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,  
And I will sit on the mount of assembly  
In the recesses of the north.  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will  
make myself like the Most High."  
Isaiah 14:13-14 (NASB)*

Satan wanted the highest position and to be in control, just as God was. Satan did not want to be anyone's slave.

Now notice that Jesus added, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Jesus has given us a definition of humility again. *Humility serves!* Philippians 2:8 says,

*Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:8 (NASB)*

This is a clear statement that humility is submissive. Humility is so submissive that it will die for someone. That was not true of the disciples. This is not true of most people. Oh, we will die for a spouse or a child because we love them. But a better test is will you die for someone else? Jesus did (Romans 5:7-8).

*For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:7-8 (NASB)*

Jesus gave the disciples a personal example of humility in the Upper Room when He washed their feet. We are told in John 13:3-5,

*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. John 13:3-5 (NASB)*

When Jesus did this, He performed an act that only slaves or servants were supposed to do. Apparently, there were no slaves in the Upper Room to wash the disciples feet when they entered the room. It is obvious that none of the disciples had volunteered to wash one another's feet. No one wanted to do what a slave was supposed to do. Even though Jesus had rebuked them repeatedly for their pride, they had not yet learned the lesson. So, Jesus washed their feet. He took the lowest position and served them as a slave would. He washed their dirty, dusty, smelly feet. Have you ever washed a strang-



er's feet? I have! It is humbling. I did not expect to feel that way, but I did. You kneel before them. You wash their feet in water and then wipe them with a cloth to dry them. It is an experience like no other. That is what Jesus did.

When Jesus finished washing their feet He said,

You also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

John 13:14b-15 (NASB)

What was Jesus' point? We need to follow Jesus' example by being humble.

**Conclusion.** Then Jesus concluded with,

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28 (NASB)

Now Jesus tied everything together. Jesus is the ultimate example of humility by dying for everyone. He is the greatest! He is the first! Humility is not deceptive or ambitious. It does not desire to be first, or to seek control. Humility is not feeling bad about yourself. Jesus' definition of humility is submission to others. Humility serves others, even to the point of dying for others. I have never seen a snake do that. Have you? Satan will not, but Jesus does! What about you? When is the last time you yielded and submitted to another person?