

# Jesus on Leadership, Power & Authority (20:17-34)

There are **some conversations** in life **you never forget**. For me, one of them came about ten years ago. I remember it vividly because I was sitting at a fantastic restaurant in Louisville, KY called **Hammerheads**. Best pork belly BLT you'll ever have in your life. If you didn't know, now you know. Trust me on that. But while the *food* was phenomenal, the *conversation* was decidedly *less* so. Me and a few other pastors were spending some time with a pastor of a much larger church. He was gracious enough to spend some time with us and answer some questions we had.

And somewhere along the line, the **conversation had turned** to something we do called "teaching team." This is a process that *City Church* actually has in place where a team of multiple people speak into what we say up here on Sunday mornings. Every idea is examined, considered and dissected in order to make sure we're being truthful and helpful to people in how we teach the Scriptures. In fact, our teaching team approved *this sentence*. And *this* one. But this teaching team—we find it extremely beneficial to the way we do ministry. But this pastor we were meeting with was not a fan of the idea, at all. We told him about it, and he said, "oh, that'll *never* work."

I was **a little caught off-guard** by his comment. Partly, because of how direct and blunt it was. But also, I felt like he had *missed* a key detail: this teaching team wasn't an *idea* we were *considering*; it was something we had been doing, fairly *successfully*, for several years at that point. But not wanting to make a big deal about it, we just asked him, "what do you mean it won't work?" He responded by saying that, in his view, "high caliber" leaders wouldn't want to *submit* themselves to a team where other people tell them what they can and can't say. "That's stifling," he said. "What if he wants to say something from stage and everybody on the team thinks it's a bad idea?" Internally I was thinking "...then it's probably a bad idea."

But this guy we met for dinner is sort of **representative of a brand of leadership** within the church. The idea being that leaders should be these aggressive, decisive, bold pioneers—and apparently, above all else, they shouldn't have to submit or listen to anyone who opposes them. But just a broad survey across evangelicalism will tell you that that style of leadership hasn't exactly taken us to good places. Sometimes it seems like it *frequently* takes us to very *bad* places. There are entire blogs and podcasts out there to detail the spectacular *failures* of that brand of leadership within the church. **And in fact, about three years after that conversation at Hammerheads, I found out that that guy's lead pastor had stepped down amid allegations of domineering and over-aggressive behavior.**

But my **primary concern with that leadership style isn't** just that it leads to bad *places*. That's just a *symptom* of the problem. **The problem is that it is an unbiblical approach to leadership.** And my concern is that within the church, when we highlight and elevate *that* style of leadership, we're actually being more formed by the world *around* us, than we are by the Scriptures. And truth be told, that's only *one* way to be formed by the world in our view of power and authority; there are more where *that* came from.

If you have a **bible, turn with me to Matthew 20.** If you're new to our church, we've been walking through the book of Matthew together for a while now. And in this section, Jesus is talking specifically about **relationships** within the kingdom of God. And today, his attention turns to how *leadership, power, and authority* operate within the kingdom. And I think there's plenty here for us to glean from. So that's where we're headed this morning. Pick it up with me in Matthew 20, starting in v. 17:

*[17] Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, [18] "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death [19] and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

So this is at least **the third time** that Jesus has delivered a warning like this to his disciples, about the things that are going to happen to him in the near future. **For all of Jesus' teaching and miracles, this whole thing is leading to a day when he will be mocked, flogged, and then executed on a Roman cross.** That's the moment he's trying to *prepare* the disciples for. And the *first* time Jesus gave this warning, it didn't go so hot. He said he was gonna die, one of the disciples told Jesus he was gonna stop it all from happening, Jesus called that disciple Satan—it was a whole thing. Didn't go great.<sup>1</sup> The *second* time, Matthew tells us that the disciples were "filled with grief."<sup>2</sup> They were overcome with sadness and don't know *what* to say. But **this time** when Jesus warns them again, they **start making moves**. And some *requests*. Look with me at v. 20:

*[20] Then the mother of Zebedee's sons ("Zebedee's sons" are James and John—two of the disciples. So their mom) 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."*

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<sup>1</sup> Read this account in Matthew 16:21-23.

<sup>2</sup> Read this account in Matthew 17:22-23.

So the request being made is for Jesus to appoint James and John—her two sons—to **positions of authority** and *recognition*. “Seated at your right hand and your left” would be kind of like saying she wanted them to be Jesus’ vice president and secretary of state, respectively. She wants them to be placed in positions of *power* once the kingdom of Jesus arrives. Now, she’s not going and doing this *behind her son’s backs*. It says in the passage that James and John are *right there with her* when it happens. But it’s still *her making* the request: she’s going straight to the man in charge, and lobbying for her sons to get some recognition. **In other words, this is mama bear doing mama bear things.**

But take a look at **Jesus’ response**, v. 22:

[22] “You don’t know **what you are asking**,” Jesus said to **them**. Notice Jesus knows the request is coming from *all* of them, not just the mom. “Can you drink the **cup** I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.

So for reference here, **“drinking the cup”** was a common metaphor throughout the Old Testament to refer to some sort of impending suffering and/or punishment. So when Jesus says “can you drink the cup I’m going to drink,” he’s saying “are you prepared to *suffer* like I’m going to *suffer*?” To which James and John answer, “yep!” Now, that’s quite the eager response for people who just heard Jesus say he’s about to be captured, tortured, and killed—don’t you think? ~~To me, this is a bit reminiscent of times my six year old wants to buy the \$100+plus sets of LEGOs for sale at Target. I’ll usually ask him, in jest, “I don’t know—do you have \$100 in your piggy bank?” And he’ll say, “yep, I do.” It catches me by surprise every time. I’m always like “one—solid effort. Two, you absolutely do not have anywhere close to \$100 in your piggy bank.”~~

~~James and John’s response to Jesus kind of feels like that to me.~~ They answer very confidently, saying they are prepared to do something that they are **in no way prepared** to do. I know that because even after Jesus’ *resurrection*, James and John are with the *rest* of the disciples, terrified and hiding away in a locked room.<sup>3</sup> So they talk a big game, but they don’t actually understand what they’re signing up for. But what’s fascinating is that at the same time, they end up being accidentally prophetic by saying they can. Which Jesus alludes to next. Take a look at v. 23:

[23] Jesus said to them, “You **will indeed** drink from my cup (‘you will indeed suffer much like I’m going to suffer’), **but**, Jesus says, **to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places** (the positions of authority you’re asking for) **belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.**”

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<sup>3</sup> See John 20:19

Jesus confirms that they will indeed *suffer* like he suffers, but that the positions of authority they're after aren't his call to make. Those are selected only by God the Father. Now I want you to notice here the *deference* Jesus models towards the Father. We're going to come back to this later. But to me, this is one of the most profound *mysteries* of what theologians call the Trinity. That **God the Father and Jesus the Son are completely united in purpose and intention—are completely equal—and yet Jesus chooses to submit to the Father on numerous occasions throughout his ministry.**<sup>4</sup> We read elsewhere that God the Father gives Jesus “the name that is above every name,” all power and all authority in the kingdom, and yet here *that Jesus willingly submits to the Father's authority*. Do you see that? It's *almost* as if power and authority operate very *differently* in the kingdom of God.

But *that's getting ahead of ourselves*. For *now*, let's keep moving through the passage, because Jesus now has a bit of a *problem on his hands*, as a result of this situation with James and John. Look with me at v. 24:

[24] When the **ten** (that is, the *other ten disciples*) **heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.**

The *other disciples hear about* what James and John ask for, and they're not happy about it at all. Now, it would be *noble* if they were mad because of how *inappropriate* and *presumptuous* the request was. But that's not it. **The other disciples aren't mad because James and John did something wrong; they're mad because they didn't think to do it themselves.** They're mad because it wasn't *their* idea. They got bested! They're thinking, “~~they shouldn't ask Jesus to be in charge—I should've asked Jesus to be in charge!~~” So now *everybody's pointing fingers*, *everybody's getting suspicious* of everybody else. I'd like to think that at least one of the disciples makes a passive aggressive comment about how James and John got their *mom* involved—you know the drill. The whole thing just devolves, right? It's a mess.

So in response, *Jesus does what he often does*, which is that he uses all of this as the backdrop for a *teaching moment* with the disciples. And these verses are where we're going to drill down for our teaching this morning. Look with me at v. 25:

[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.** (Read that again? *Not so with you.*) **Instead, whoever**

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 24:36 & 26:39 are two other examples of this dynamic.

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.”**

So **Jesus’ point** here is very simple. He says that **the reason the disciples are arguing over who gets to be in charge is because they’ve misunderstood what being in charge is about in his kingdom.** They’ve modeled *their* understanding of power and authority after “the Gentiles” (which was a way of saying “the rest of the world”). The way the *world* does power is that whoever is *great* is in charge, and those people *wield* their authority by having everyone else serve *them*. They throw their weight around. They impose *their* will on everybody else around them. That’s the worldly approach to leadership, power and authority.

But Jesus **follows that** description with **this crucial sentence:** “...*not so with you.*” **That might be how authority operates in the world, Jesus says, but that’s not at all how authority operates in the kingdom.** In the *kingdom*, the person who wants to be *great* should act as a servant to everyone else. Whoever wants to be *first*, should function like the *last*. Now notice that this is **not a new idea** at all. In fact, in the very first passage in this section of Matthew, back in ch. 18, Jesus says that whoever wants to be great in the kingdom should take “the lowly position of a child.”<sup>5</sup> Marcus mentioned in the teaching that week that in the ancient world, children and slaves were pretty much on the same level, sociologically speaking.

So Jesus **has been trying to show** his disciples this for at least the last three chapters. He’s been trying to show them that **greatness in the kingdom isn’t about being first. It’s about seeing yourself as last.** But what he’s saying still isn’t *registering* with them. They’re still *vying* for position and power and influence. They’re still *arguing* about who is the greatest, and who gets to be *first*. They’re still very *blind* to the way they have been formed and shaped by the world’s definitions of authority. They still do not get it.

So **here in Matthew 20**, Jesus has just made it clear to them that he is about to be arrested, tortured, and *killed*. **Jesus is saying to them, “hey—this is how power and authority looks in my kingdom. This is what greatness does. Not being served by others. But serving others. To the point that I’m going to give my very life for others.”** Could there be a more stark contrast to the world’s categories of power than Jesus? A man choosing to give up his very life for others? And yet the disciples respond to all of this by *campaigning* for power and authority yet again. **They are blinded by their desire for**

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<sup>5</sup> See specifically Matthew 18:4.

greatness, and *blinded* to the very different kingdom, taking shape before their very eyes. And Jesus wants to help them see it.

But you know, it's interesting: Matthew **doesn't tell us how the disciples *respond*** to this teaching from Jesus. I wish he did. I wish we could get a glimpse of them realizing their error, opening their eyes to how power and authority truly operate in the kingdom. But we don't get that. What we *do* get...is a story about two blind men. Let's read through *it* and then we'll talk for a bit about how it might connect to everything else. Verse 29...

[29] As Jesus and his disciples were **leaving Jericho**, a large crowd followed him. [30] **Two blind men** were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" ["Son of David" was a clear, messianic title for Jesus. These blind men evidently know *exactly* who Jesus is, they *believe* he's the Messiah, and they believe because of that, he can *heal* them. Verse 31...] [31] The crowd **rebuked** them and told them to be quiet, but they **shouted all the louder**, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" [32] Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you **want** me to do for you?" he asked. [33] "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight." [34] Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and [notice this part—they...] **followed** him.

Now, **on the surface**, this feels like a **pretty random** story about Jesus healing two blind men. Doesn't seem to have much to do with leadership, power or authority—*nor* does it seem like it has much to do with the passage that *follows it* in chapter 21. So we could read it as just what it is: just one more story about Jesus healing people in the gospel of Matthew. And don't get me wrong: if that's all it was, it would be an *incredible* story. We should never grow so accustomed to stories of healing in the bible that we fail to appreciate them.

But **I, for one**, am inclined to read this story as a **little bit more than that**. And I'm inclined in that direction for a couple reasons. One, it's the only detailed description of a healing we've read about for quite a while in Matthew. It's the *only* one in this *section* of Matthew. And two, if you know anything about Matthew's gospel, you know that it is a literary *masterpiece*. The order and structure of the book at times communicate as much as the *content* does.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Matthew doesn't put anything where he puts it by *accident*. **He doesn't look at it and go, "man: really feels like I could use a few more verses in here before the next thing. Let's see...I've got this healing story about two blind men—let's throw *that* in there!"** Matthew is far more deliberate and strategic than that.

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<sup>6</sup> The Bible Project does a great job demonstrating some of this in their Matthew video [here](#).

So **here's my take** on it. I think this is a *literal* story about Jesus *literally* healing two blind men who ask for healing. *And* I think Matthew places it where he places it as a poetic *conclusion* to the conversation Jesus just had with his disciples. Let me explain. Jesus has just had a conversation with his disciples about how they still aren't *seeing* the kingdom correctly. They still are misunderstanding the nature of the kingdom. And more specifically, the nature of power and authority and leadership *within* the kingdom. We could even say that they are still "*blind*" to aspects of the kingdom, and Jesus wants to grant them the ability to see it.

And **then, Jesus comes across two men** who are, *literally, blind*. To me, it's made even more interesting by the parallels between the stories. *Two disciples* come to Jesus wanting *authority*, and *two blind men* come to Jesus wanting *healing*. Jesus asks the blind men, just like he asked *James and John*, "what is it that you *want*?" Jesus *doesn't* give the disciples what they want, because it's not his to grant. He *does* give the blind men what they want, because it *is* his to grant. And then, it says, these two formerly blind men "follow" Jesus. I think Matthew could be telling us that **in the upside-down, unexpected kingdom of Jesus, sometimes *disciples are blind, and blind men become disciples***. I think that could *possibly* be why this story is *placed* where it is in the gospel of Matthew.

But **even if not**, I think our passage still raises the question we've been asking *throughout* the book of Matthew: **where am I not seeing the kingdom correctly?** What am I *blind* to—especially in this case as it relates to leadership, power and authority in the kingdom of God? Where have I misunderstood what it means to be in charge, and how might Jesus want to help open *my* eyes? I think Jesus' teaching on all of this changes quite a few things about our view of power and authority, and I want to make sure we see it in vivid color this morning. So I've got **three things** for you. First...

### **It changes how we *pursue* authority.**

**At the center** of this passage is a **rebuke** from Jesus towards two of his disciples (and their mom) who are *pursuing* positions of authority. They want to be at Jesus' right and left hand, ruling and reigning and exercising authority over people. **They want to function as leaders, the way the world sees leadership.** But Jesus' *response* is 1) to tell them they don't know what they're asking, 2) to ask them if they're willing to *suffer*, 3) tell them that the positions of power they're pursuing aren't *his* to *grant*, and 4) correct them to help them see what leadership is truly *for*. That's quite the *stiff-arm* to their request for positions of authority, if I've ever heard one.

So it would seem that **when people approach Jesus** desiring positions of power and influence, that his response is, *bare minimum*, “slow down.” Slow your roll. If you’re *eager* to have a position of power and authority, you may not truly realize what you’re asking. Some of you in the room today are *pursuing* positions of power, authority, and influence in life. You’re *eager* to be in charge. Maybe that’s at work. Maybe it’s at your school. Maybe it’s within the *church*. Maybe it’s in the *bizarre* world of influence and prominence that is social media. But let’s say you’re here this morning, and you are *eager* to arrive at that place of authority. *Prestige*. *Accolades*. *Recognition*. If that’s you, I would just ask you to think critically about it: are there any of Jesus’ *cautions* that you need to hear?

For starters, **do you understand what you’re asking for?** Do you understand *what comes with* being in a position of leadership, power, and authority? It’s not just the *privilege* of being in charge; it’s also the *burden*. Specifically, **do you understand that leadership is frequently accompanied by** (some type of) **suffering?** When you’re in charge, a lot of things get *aimed at* you as a result. Being in charge often means you become a punching bag for people’s deepest frustrations. Are you *prepared* for that? Are you *equipped to handle* it?

**Do you understand where authority comes from?** The book of Romans tells us that “there is no authority except that which God has established.”<sup>7</sup> Do you understand that he *assigns*, and therefore knows who should be *in*, authority? And do you *trust* that if he *doesn’t* want you in authority right now, there may be a reason for that? And lastly, **do you understand what authority is for?** Because if you only want to be in charge because it *feels* good to be in charge, I hope you realize that that is a recipe for disaster. Disaster for *you*, and for others who are impacted by your leadership. So...are there any of those cautions you need to wrestle with? Let’s not be like the disciples who were so *eager* to be in authority that they didn’t fully think it through.

This passage *changes* the way we *pursue* authority. **At the least**, I think it gives us a bit of pause when *asking* for it. Second...

**It changes how we view authority.**

I don’t know if you’ve picked up on this, but we’re **not huge fans of authority** in our society. In general, we are very cynical towards it. I’ve met quite a few people in my life at this point, and you know what I’ve discovered? Approximately 95% of all people think their boss at work is an *idiot*. Isn’t that crazy? 95% of *all* bosses (*in the whole world!?*) are idiots. But you know what else is interesting? I’ve found that out of all the people I’ve

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 13:1



known that *hold* positions of authority at work *themselves*, almost *none* of them think of *themselves* as idiots. Which makes me wonder if our problem is a little bit more with the position *itself*, than it is about the specific people *in* those positions.

**In general, our view** is that if someone is in a position of authority—especially authority over *us*—they’re probably awful. Or bare minimum, they’re a little more awful than we are. Our *bosses* are all idiots. Our *professors* are all incompetent. Our *politicians* are all corrupt. Our *parents* are all overbearing. Church leaders are all hypocrites. Are you seeing a *pattern* here at all? I think we might just have a *problem* with authority. Or, as I heard someone say once, “we’re *great* with authority—as long as that authority is us.”

Now, that said, I want you to see that on *some level* in this passage, Jesus *does* offer a critique of *bad* authority. “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over people,” he says. “But *not* so with you.” Jesus says, ‘that’s not how I want *you—my disciples*—to approach authority.’ That’s an *implicit critique* of worldly authority. *But* Jesus *isn’t* like some of *us*: he doesn’t oppose the *idea* of authority *in general*. In fact, in this very passage, *he* models a *respect for it*. He says that who gets to sit at his right hand and left—that’s up to the *Father* to decide and him to accept. That’s not up to him. Jesus models deference to some authority *throughout* his life.

And **throughout the New Testament, we are actually encouraged to show a generous posture towards those in authority.** *1 Timothy* tells us to pray for and thank God for “kings and all those in authority.”<sup>8</sup> *1 Peter* tells us to *honor* and even *submit* to human authority over us.<sup>9</sup> The book of *Hebrews* tells us—and I get that I’m about to lose a lot of you with this one—to have confidence in, submit to, and even *imitate* your *church* leaders.<sup>10</sup> And I could go on. Now, there are limits and parameters to those types of instructions in the bible, to be sure. Those commands aren’t *absolute*. And we’ve done sermons before where we have nuanced all that out at-length.<sup>11</sup>

But listen: **the bible does not take the same, hyper-critical, hyper-cynical posture towards all authority that many of us do.** We are free—even *encouraged*—to be *discerning* about good and bad authority. But **if you have an automatic problem with any authority in any setting, you’re gonna have a real issue with the Scriptures.** And if that’s you, you’re not gonna be much of a fan of Jesus, either. Because Jesus both *is* an authority to each of us, and *models submission to* authority throughout his life. **Authority, in Jesus’ mind, is not automatically bad, corrupt, or dangerous.**

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 2:1-2

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 2:13-17, specifically v. 13 & 17

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 13:7, 17

<sup>11</sup> The most recent being [here](#).

**Authority is a tool to be stewarded and used to proper ends.** Do people *misuse and abuse* authority? *Absolutely.* Does that mean all authority is *bad*? *Absolutely not.*

Which means our **default posture** towards authority **shouldn't be** opposition. *Discernment*, sure, but not *hostility*. In fact, do this with me. I want you to think back over the last *three* bosses, supervisors, or employers you had. If you haven't had that many, just pick a person in authority over you: a teacher, a parent, a pastor. I'll give you a second... Okay, out of those three people, can you name *something* that *one* of them did that *benefitted* you as a human being or an employee? *Something* they did that developed you, helped you, challenged you towards growth? Anything at all? Okay, if you *can't* name a single thing, and be appreciative for it, I think you're actually deceived. I think you've actually just pre-determined that all authority in your life is bad. You see, Jesus changes how we *view*—and *relate to*—people in authority. And then finally...

### It changes how we **exercise authority**.

Lastly, what Jesus makes clear in this passage (and throughout the gospels) is that **good authority exists primarily for one thing: to serve others.** Jesus says, “if anyone wants to be great, they must act as a *servant* to those around them.” **Authority in the world means everyone else orients themselves around you. Authority in the kingdom means you orient yourself around others.** You *serve* others. You *help* others. You contribute to the greater good around you, *using* your position of power and authority to that end.

So let me put it to you like this. If at any point **you find yourself** in a position of authority or influence, and you start thinking to yourself: *good. We're finally gonna do things my way around here. Now, finally, people are gonna have to do what I want them to do. Finally, people are gonna have to orient themselves around my ideas. My wishes. My preferences.* If that's your posture, *watch out.* Because that brand of leadership is far more shaped by the *world's* definition of authority than it is by the *kingdom's*. **In the kingdom, authority isn't expressed by expecting everyone else to orient themselves around you. But instead, in Jesus' words, “taking the posture of a servant. Just as the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve. And to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

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To elaborate on all of this **just a tad more** as we close, I want to read another passage with me up on the screen. If you've been around City Church long, you've probably heard us mention this passage again and again. It's very central to how we approach life together as a community. This is Paul, writing to the Philippian church, about how Jesus

used *his* power and authority. I think it's a good place for us to land this morning. Take a look with me:

*In your relationships with one another, have the same **mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a **servant**, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a **man**, he **humbled himself** by becoming obedient to **death—even death on a cross! Therefore God** exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, who *was* and *is* God, did not consider *equality* with God something to be used to selfish or self-oriented ends. Instead, he *emptied* himself, taking the position and posture of a servant—even to the point of dying a brutal death on a cross. All for the purpose of serving, loving, and giving himself to the people around them. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the ultimate fulfillment of what he's been saying for the last three chapters of Matthew: whoever is first will be last, and whoever is last will be first. In the kingdom of Jesus, whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.

And it is by looking to Jesus on the cross, who came not to *be* served, but *to serve*, that we receive the ability to do the same. *That* is what leadership, power, and authority was meant to look like.

Let's pray together.

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:5-11