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GREATNESS IN GOD’S KINGDOM



Greatness in the eyes of the world is usually associated with people who do great deeds and gain great power and recognition. They are few in number, an elite club in human history. Greatness in God’s kingdom is quite different. It is not a matter of gaining human power or recognition but of gaining God’s recognition and approval. And it is not limited to a few but open to all. What follows is a case study of a group of ambitious men who sought human greatness long ago and how they discovered kingdom greatness. Their experience has lessons for today.

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “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?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory”... And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:35–37, 41–45)¹

James and John were among the first people Jesus called to be His disciples. Along with Peter, they formed the inner circle of Jesus’s followers. It is not surprising that they would have felt a certain seniority or “pride of place” in the apostolic band. But their self-centered approach to leadership in this situation triggered an angry reaction from the other disciples. It appeared to be an end run around the others, an attempted power grab. Perhaps the unfairness of it roiled them, or perhaps they were wanting those prized positions themselves! Or more likely, both.

In any case, Jesus turned this event into a teachable moment for His disciples by instructing them about greatness in God’s kingdom (and addressing their underlying pride and self-seeking in the process). The great ones of the earth, he said, are noted for exalting themselves and for exercising power, domination, and control over those under them. But life in the kingdom of God does not operate this way. It is an upside-down kingdom, just the opposite of the kingdoms of this world. And nowhere is this more obvious than in matters of power and leadership. Jesus said that those who want to be great in God’s kingdom may achieve that, but not by the world’s methods. Believers can achieve greatness only by first redefining greatness in terms of serving others, not just themselves.



Jesus goes on to reinforce this point by saying that His own life and ministry are devoted to serving others not Himself. This should have been obvious in His feeding of the hungry, healing of the sick, delivering the demonized, raising the dead, teaching the multitudes, and caring for the disciples. Jesus was a servant par excellence. In fact, He was the greatest servant in history, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, and He would soon perform the greatest act of servanthood in history by giving His life on the cross to pay for the sins of the world.

This clear, simple, and powerful lesson should have registered with the disciples. It should have reoriented their hearts and set them on a different course in life—a course of humble servanthood, like their Master. But it didn’t. Luke records that on another occasion,

An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.” (Luke 9:46–48)

Instead of getting better, things had gotten worse. The twelve disciples were now trying to calculate who was the greatest and were openly arguing among themselves about their status. Jesus dealt with this situation by bringing a little child into



the group and sitting the child down beside Himself, to teach His disciples an object lesson. Unlike today, in Jesus's time children were considered weak, a burden, and of little value. But Jesus, with patience and gentleness, tried to remind the disciples that the one who is least (like a child) in the kingdom of God is actually the greatest. Surely, this reminder of His earlier lesson would bring a breakthrough. But no, apparently it had no effect.

As time passed, the downward spiral continued. In the midst of the Passover meal just before Jesus's death, the most sacred moments of their years with Jesus, just after the Twelve had taken the bread and wine,

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. (Luke 22:24–30)

Some things die a slow death in our lives. The pride and self-seeking that feed the desire for human greatness is one of them. Jesus knew their weaknesses and frailties, and He responded with grace and patience, repeating once again that kingdom people must not live by worldly principles. The greatest must become the servant of all, just as He had been doing for the past three years they had been together.



Luke says nothing more about that evening, but John gives us graphic details of how Jesus went on to deepen the impact of His teaching by taking the role of the lowest servant in a Jewish household and washing the disciples' feet:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him...

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (John 13:1–5, 12–17)

In a very concrete way, Jesus is trying to help His disciples connect their belief in Him as "Teacher and Lord" to their attitude and behavior toward one another — and indeed, to all people. He was in their midst as a servant, a servant who loved them and was about to give up His life for them. If He could wash their feet, they should wash one another's feet. In this way, they would follow His example and the command He was about to give them: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). In other words, their faith in Him was to be expressed through love for Him, a love that would take the form of humble, loving service to one another. This love would come from the indwelling Holy Spirit and would not be limited to foot washing, but would extend to whatever needs they encountered along life's way — of believers and nonbelievers. Jesus concludes by saying that knowing these things is not enough; they would be blessed only if they actually did them. Judging by the attitude of Peter's heart in 1 Pet. 5:1–7 (seen in the passage below), it seems clear that he got the message. I think we can confidently conclude that the others did as well.



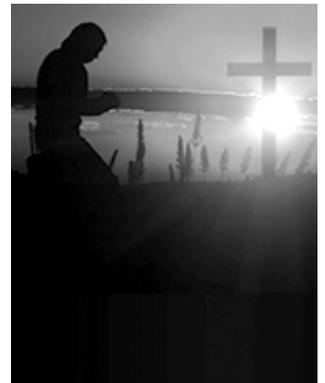
So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

It might be tempting to think that this teaching applied only to the twelve disciples cited in the examples above. But that option is not open to us. They were the initial leadership cadre of Christ's followers on earth and their lives are meant to be examples to all who would follow Jesus in the future. The early church in Acts understood this and saw themselves as "disciples" just like the Twelve. This is evident in that the word disciple is used twenty-eight times in Acts to refer to people who had come to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Only later did the name Christian come into use as a synonym for disciple ("in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians," Acts 11:26). Thus, what Jesus taught the Twelve is just as applicable to believers today as it was to them long ago.

Paul was well aware of Jesus's teaching on the centrality of servanthood and humility. He urged the church in Philippi to

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:5–11)



Paul called all members of the church to serve one another. He saw servanthood as the path to Christlikeness and true greatness in God's kingdom and knew it was open to everyone, not just church leaders. We follow that path by seeking to please an audience of One, just as Jesus did, humbling ourselves, taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to the Father's will whatever it may be.

Paul gave some very helpful, practical guidance to the Philippian believers for this journey — guidance that is valuable to us today. He says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Phil. 2:3–4, NIV). This principle of life is a simple way to serve others. By doing so, we are putting love into action, for love is not simply feeling or emotion but an act of the will, in which we seek the good of others through concrete actions that help them (Matt. 7:12).

Serving others, seeking their good out of love, is how we express our faith in concrete actions. This lies at the heart of the Christian life. Paul says that in Christ, what matters most is "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). And he goes on to say, "through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Humble servanthood, then, flowing from love, is one of the chief expressions of saving faith among God's people and the path to greatness before God.

How can we live this way? To be sure, we cannot do it through our unaided human strength. Why not? Because our old self, the flesh, is too strong. We are prone to take ourselves too seriously, to think too highly of ourselves and our abilities, and to desire the praises of others. That is why, for example, Paul tells the Romans, "I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment" (Rom. 12:3, NIV). An accurate view of



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ourselves is an important step on the road of servanthood. In light of the sober realism it gives us, we can see opportunities to serve others in whatever ways our gifts and resources permit.

How do we obtain accurate self-understanding? Prayer is the starting place. Ask God to help you see yourself as you really are and be alert to what He shows you. This may come as an unexpected insight, through prayer, through reading Scripture, or through another person. (You may want to consider asking someone close to you who has good insight and judgment to give you feedback about your strengths and weaknesses.)

Accurate self-knowledge is necessary; however, it cannot by itself enable us to live a life of servanthood. We need something more: God's love and power must move us to serve others. The good news is that if we are born again Christians, His love and power are already in us, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). The bad news is that many Christians do not experience this treasure in daily life because they are dominated by their old self, the flesh. This is why Paul commands the Galatians to "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:15–17). A similar command to the Ephesians reads, "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Paul's repeated emphasis on being filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit is rooted in the fact that only through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit can we overcome the downward impulses of the old self and live the humble, Christlike life to which God calls us.

Have you discovered how to walk by the Spirit? Are you doing so daily? If not, make it your top priority to learn how to live the Spirit-filled life that Paul commands in Gal. 5:16f and Eph. 5:18f. Once you do, life will never be the same. Don't settle for anything less!

In conclusion, we can say that true greatness in God's kingdom — greatness in God's sight — is possible for every born again believer who seeks to follow Jesus in humble servanthood through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this to which God calls each of us as we seek to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. ■

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are English Standard Version.



Ambition! We must be careful what we mean by it. If it means the desire to get ahead of other people – which is what I think it does mean – then it is bad. If it means simply wanting to do a thing well, then it is good. It isn't wrong for an actor to want to act his part as well as it can possibly be acted, but the wish to have his name in bigger type than the other actors is a bad one.
— C.S. Lewis



- 1 According to Tom Tarrants, how does greatness in the eyes of the world differ from greatness in God's Kingdom?
- 2 Near the end of the article, Tarrants asks: "Have you discovered how to walk by the Spirit? Are you doing so daily?" After prayerfully considering these questions, how would you answer them? Are there steps you would like to take to make living the Spirit-filled life daily your top priority?



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RECOMMENDED READING

Jerry Bridges, *The Blessing of Humility* (NavPress, 2016)

We all admire humility when we see it. But how do we practice it? How does humility — the foundational virtue of the normal Christian life — become a normal part of our everyday lives?

Jerry Bridges sees in the Beatitudes a series of blessings from Jesus, a pattern for humility in action. Starting with poverty in spirit — an acknowledgment that in and of ourselves we are incapable of living holy lives pleasing to God — and proceeding through our mourning over personal sin, our hunger and thirst for righteousness, our experience of persecutions large and small, and more, we discover that humility is itself a blessing: At every turn, God is present to us, giving grace to the humble and lifting us up to blessing.

