

During a NCAA basketball tournament held several years ago, the head coach was asked a question prior to a big game. He was asked, “Why has your team done so well?” “What is it about this team that has made it come as far as it has, because everybody wants to know about your success?”

He answered, “We have a motto on our team, and the motto is this: ‘Great people do for others.’”

In the context of basketball, what the coach was saying was this: We don’t have anyone who selfishly thinks he has to be the star; he doesn’t try to make the basket every time he comes down the court as some players might do. We have a team that says, “Great people do for others” – that is, “let’s give everybody an opportunity to contribute by sharing the ball – let’s do something for somebody else.”

Great people do for others and that truth is echoed in our final passage of Esther – a passage that speaks about greatness, not necessarily from man’s perspective – not from this world’s perspective, but from God’s. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Esther 10**, and we will read the entire chapter. We are told,

¹Now King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. ²And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia? ³For Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.

That’s it. That concludes the story. In these last few verses of the Book of Esther, we are told that **King Ahasuerus** taxed the people in his empire. We’re not told why he did this, but for the most powerful man in the known world at that time – that’s all the king gets – this one verse about taxes.

Now **Mordecai**, gets a little more, for there is mention of his authority as the number two man in the empire, we are told that his accomplishments are documented in the official records, and there is a reference to his **greatness**.

Two times in this passage, greatness is attributed to Mordecai, because he used his position to help the Jews instead of helping himself. Yes, the Jews were still under the reign and rule of a foreign king, but God used Mordecai as an advocate for His people as he sought their **good** and **spoke** on their behalf.

Mordecai was considered great – not because of his lofty *position*, not because of his *power* and *authority*, not because of his *wealth*, and not because of his *accomplishments* – but because of what he did for others.

You know, Jesus had something to say about this topic of greatness. One day, after His transfiguration on the mountain, Jesus was walking on the road with His disciples traveling through the region of Galilee towards Capernaum.

On the way, Jesus explains to them that He will suffer many things, He will be put to death, and three days later He will rise again, but the disciples did not understand God’s plan for redemption. They can’t handle the idea of a dying Messiah – they can’t process what Jesus is saying – it just doesn’t compute to them, and they were afraid to ask Jesus for clarification – maybe because of the recent rebuke of Peter when Jesus said “*Get behind me Satan.*” So, they continue to remain in their confusion about this extremely important matter.

Now during their long walk, the disciples were also talking amongst themselves about another very important matter – at least it was to them – and this brings us to **Mark 9**, beginning with **verse 33** where we are told,

³³They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

They’d been walking for a long time, maybe 20 to 30 miles, and along the way, the disciples had been discussing – most likely arguing, about who was the **greatest** among them. Well, they get to the house in Capernaum, and Jesus asks His disciples what they had been talking about on the way – as if He didn’t already know.

Jesus asks His question but they keep silent – most likely because they were too embarrassed to admit they were arguing about who was the top dog – and they should be embarrassed in light of the fact that just a few days earlier Jesus had confirmed to them that He is the Christ. They now know who Jesus is – He’s the Messiah, He’s going to establish His kingdom, and in light of this revealed truth about Himself, Jesus says something about them. In **Mark 8:34**, He says,

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”

I want to talk about this passage for a moment because it's very relevant to the topic of greatness. In His invitation, Jesus said that to come after Him – to be His disciples, they must **deny** themselves.

That word *deny* is a verb, and in this context, it means to disown, to reject, or to refuse to associate with someone. It's the same word that Peter would later use when he denied Jesus by saying, ***"I don't know the man,"*** and in many respects, that's exactly what we are told to do with ourselves.

"I don't want to know the fallen man I used to be." "I don't want anything to do with that sinful and selfish person I once knew." "I don't want to see that self-righteous man again in my life." "I disown that self-seeking person who still – even now, wants to control me."

The disciples of Jesus must deny themselves – where in humility, they *reject* their self-centered nature to do whatever they please, they *renounce* the idea that the world revolves around them, and they give up the *right* to run their own lives. There is room for only one Master in our relationship with the Lord, and we are not it.

Jesus also said that His disciples are to **take up** their cross. In those days, carrying one's cross reflected absolute submission to the authority of Rome as a condemned man was forced to carry his cross through the city to the place of his death. For the condemned man – the fight was completely over – it was a sufferable, one-way trip with no turning back, so likewise for a disciple, to carry one's cross demonstrates a submission to the authority and the will of God – no turning back.

And lastly, Jesus told His disciples they must **follow** Him. The Greek means to *"move behind someone going in the same direction"* and this points to the continual activity of walking with Jesus – going where He went, doing what He did, and trusting what He said. A disciple of Jesus must be willing to walk behind their Master.

In a nutshell, to deny yourself means saying *"no"* to you, to take up your cross means saying *"yes"* to God, and to follow means to walk with Him in obedience, or maybe expressed in a better way, *"Lord, not my will but Yours be done. I'm walking with You – no turning back."*

So, what is the relevance to greatness here? Why bring this up? I bring it up because denying yourself, and taking up your cross, and following Him is a personal invitation to greatness in the Kingdom of God whereby we give our devotion to God and to His purposes rather than doing what comes naturally and

devoting *ourselves* to *ourselves* – something the disciples were still apparently struggling with.

This is what Jesus had been modelling and teaching to His disciples in both word and deed for a few years, a devotion to the Father and His will, but unfortunately, the disciples are still thinking about themselves – their own importance and status. **Who is the greatest?** That's what they had been discussing.

Well, as you might guess, another teaching moment by Jesus was in order. So, let's continue with **Mark 9, verse 35**.

Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

So, Jesus sits down which indicates He is going to teach, He calls the class to order, and then He begins the lesson and says to them, **“If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all”** which seems to springboard from His invitation to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and to follow Him.

Now just to be clear, Jesus does not condemn the desire to improve one's position in life, and He's not condemning ambition. Ambition for the right thing can be a good thing, but what Jesus is saying and I am going to paraphrase is this,

“If you want to be first – and I know you do – if you're serious about greatness in the Kingdom of God, then you got to accept the fact that it's not about you. You got to willingly and humbly serve others. You must deliberately put the welfare of others before your own selfish plans and interests.”

In other words, it's not about you – it's about those around you.

Let's be honest for a moment. This teaching by Jesus goes against our fallen nature, **doesn't it?** That's because we have an *“I”* problem – as in *“me, myself, and I.”* We want to be honored and noticed; we want glory, we want to be elevated; and we want to be served because we live in a culture that tells us you are great if others are serving you. We live in a culture that tells us it's about our desires, our interests, our agendas, our status, our comfort, our will, and our wants.

So, this teaching by Jesus about greatness appears backwards – it's the opposite of what comes natural to us, and it might be hard to accept.

Linda is a first-grade teacher who told about an interaction she had with one of her students on the first day of school. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, Ryan was getting his things ready to leave for home when he was

actually supposed to be heading to lunch with the rest of the class. Linda asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. Linda tried to explain that, now that he is in the first grade, he would have a longer school day. "You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home." Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding, but convinced of her seriousness, Ryan then put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

As believers, it's easy to feel a little like Ryan when we consider the Christian life. *"What do you mean I got to be the last of all and the servant of all?" "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"*

"If anyone wants to be first, he shall be the last of all and servant of all."

In God's Kingdom, greatness is not determined by our rank, our status, or our position in this life. Greatness is not determined by the power we have, the possessions we gain, or through the accomplishments we boast about, but rather greatness is determined by our willingness to put others ahead of ourselves.

Again, it's not about you – it's about those around you.

Jesus would later demonstrate this when He washed the disciple's feet the night before He was crucified. They all thought they were too important to wash feet, that was a job reserved for the lowest of servants, but Jesus showed them what servanthood was all about. He was the Son of God, the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah – they knew it, but Jesus didn't lead with a *fancy title*, He led with a *foot towel*. That's who Jesus was and that's what He wants from His disciples.

Now Jesus wasn't finished, and as a Master Teacher, Jesus introduces a living object lesson. Let's read **verses 36 and 37**.

³⁶Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."

Jesus brings in a little child because He wants to show an example of what His teaching looks like, and He takes a child and puts him in the middle of them, then Jesus lifts the child in His arms. Now in our culture, we're drawn to little children, but in that culture, young children were marginalized, they were ignored – they were at the bottom rung of the social ladder. It was the adults who mattered the most – not kids.

So, after getting their attention with the child, Jesus said to them,

“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”

What was Jesus saying here? Jesus was telling His disciples that receiving and serving someone who is at the bottom of the pecking order and ignored, like a little child, is the same as receiving and serving God.

When we reach out to the lowest, and to the least, and to the lost – our acts of service are not missed by Heaven – they are noticed, and there is great blessing which comes through service.

When I read this passage, I thought about the parable told by Jesus concerning the sheep and the goats. Turn with me to **Matthew 25:31-40** where Jesus talks about the final judgment. Listen to what He says:

³¹ “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

Jesus explained that our service to God is measured by our service to others, for as we serve one another – even the least of these – we are serving God.

So, from God's perspective, it would seem that the best thing I can do for me – has little to do with me. And the best thing you can do for you – has little to do with you. It's about others. It's about those around you.

In one of Zane Grey's novels about the Wild West, he writes about an Indian tribe that is fleeing in the night from a stronger tribe. The chief of the weaker tribe instructed his people to wait until midnight, and then they were going to escape under the cover of darkness.

The tribe came to a creek swollen with melted snow and the knee-deep river was rushing furiously. There were many young, sick, and elderly tribe members and the chief ordered the younger braves to carry them through the swift current. But some of the younger braves chose to ignore his order and they waded into the creek alone. The current was so powerful that one-by-one the single braves were swept away, but the other braves who carried children or the elderly on their backs found that the added weight of their burdens kept their feet planted securely on the bottom and they all made it to the other shore.

There's a great lesson in that story. If we go through life only serving and caring for ourselves, we face the danger of being swept away by the swift current of our self-serving culture, but if we take the time to serve and care for others, we find that they aren't heavy burdens to carry – instead they give us moral stability and keep us grounded in this life.

From God's perspective, greatness is not defined by our power, our possessions, or our accomplishments, but by whom you have served. It's not about you – it's about those around you.

Now, maybe this morning you realize that you're living for yourself. It's "me, myself, and I," and that's pretty much it. You know you've put yourself first in your priorities, and if that's where you are this morning, I ask you to think long and hard about Jesus – the One who had it all – and yet gave it all – for you. The King of kings, in humility, served you even in His death so that you might have life.

Perhaps you're a Christian, you're trusting in Jesus, and you seek greatness. Okay, but as a reminder, you can't do that by putting yourself first. Instead, look around you and serve those you see. From God's perspective, that's how true greatness is achieved in His Kingdom. It's not about you – it's about those around you.

Source Material:

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