

Gauging Greatness

Luke 9:37-48

"For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." Jesus

Introduction: Greatness

It's every young boys dream as they play imaginary World Series games in the backyard or shoot game winning free throws on the playground. Greatness is what we dream our life to be, far from mediocre or ordinary, it is a life that counts, is known, and matters. In fact, God is not opposed to our greatness, as Jesus multiple times addressed *how we attain greatness* (Mark 10:43-45; Matt. 18:4). The problem we have is coming up with the right grip, the right way to gauge greatness. The matrices the world comes up with fall short, as well as what we often use in the church.

In the standard of the world:

- **Quantifiable accomplishment** - Measured by awards, certificates, qualifications, programs started or finished, championships
- **Power/position** - Positions achieved carry significance, and the higher (or longer) the title, the larger the attainment of greatness (i.e. president, owner, CEO)
- **Acquisition** - Greatness can be tangible to the gathering of *things* - money, property, companies
- **Best in the industry** - In sports, this is characterized by the best at a certain position or how many championships have been attained. When these two converge, greatness is seemingly achieved

In our life with Christ:

- **Quantifiable accomplishment** - Mission trips, books read, disciples made, people shared with, counselee's counseled
- **Position** - Pastoral staff, elder board, other boards in other Christian non-profits, or the highest position here - Jr. High intern
- **Acquisition** - Knowledge by way of education, degrees, largeness of a church or following
- **Best in the industry** - Pride in the greatest church (the "mine is better than yours" talk), best parent, preacher, or spouse

As I'm sure you can tell by both of these lists, nothing on them is inherently wrong, bad, or sinful. It is not that any of these alone falls short of a definition of greatness, its the fact that the whole matrix is off. We tend to **start** the discussion on greatness with **us** and work outward or upward toward God. The Bible defines it in the opposite direction. Its focus is on the **greatness of God, His glory, and what He seeks to accomplish**. This accomplishment moves toward upholding His glory by drawing sinners (like us) to Himself, even though they have NOTHING to offer, nothing as far as worthiness, and by nature don't even desire Him. This leads to the **greatness of Jesus Christ**, who was both just and justifier of sinners, bringing us back, transformed to the Father. This gives us a **position as a son/daughter**, and out of this secure position, we seek to honor and glorify Him. This happens as we **yield to the Holy Spirit** (so He produces fruit from us), maturation in secret (where we truly grow), have our hearts change (the hidden person), and **ultimately fulfill God's will by the power of the Holy Spirit to the praise of Jesus Christ**. This is essentially what Jesus taught His disciples coming off the mountain after He was Transfigured. Take notice of the **3 uses of greatness in this passage**, as Luke clearly lays this out to draw our attention to this most important focus.

Greatness Displayed (9:37-43a)

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth; and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

Let's put this story in context. You remember that that the disciples had been sent out a few weeks earlier to preach the message of the gospel of the kingdom, to heal disease and cast out demons. This filled them with a sense of **confidence and anticipation**, as they **still believed that Jesus was going to be ushering in the literal, physical kingdom in a matter of days**. Everything pointed to it. And though Jesus said He had to go and die and had mentioned a cross, that seemed to be white noise and maybe Jesus was simply using disturbing hyperbole. For the disciples, they moved from a largely uneducated group of mostly blue collar workers to instruments that were sent on behalf of the Messiah. We begin to get the impression the disciples were beginning to be like men I used to take to a friend who sells whole-sale diamonds (that's right, I got a diamond guy). They would walk nervously into his office, not knowing *anything* about diamonds, ready to make a monumental purchase of an engagement ring, knowing that they were about to spend more money than they ever had before. Al would walk them through the "4 C's" of a diamonds value, and after about 45 minutes of explanation, they act snooty about the color of a proposed diamond (I was hoping to get something closer to a "h" color), at which time I reach my hand around and give a gentle yet firm slap on the back of their head. In other words, with a little knowledge, we move from unsure novice to supposed expert. The disciples were beginning to get a little ahead of themselves, and Jesus made sure to put them back in their proper place.

Jesus had just spent time up on the Mountain with 3 disciples, Moses and Elijah, and received a message from the Father. As the four came down they entered a scene that is the polar opposite of what they had just come from:

- **Contrasted Above and Below**

Above

A scene full of glory
 God given beauty & serenity
 Father was well pleased
 Son who fulfilled a plan
 Son who was worthy to be listened to
 Destroyer of demons

Below

A scene full of misery & tragedy
 Satanic ugliness & violence
 Father displeased and desperate
 Son marginalized and disconnected
 Son seemingly without purpose or value
 Destroyed by demons

The plight of a hurting father:

1. Only son of a father (Luke 9:38)
2. Possessed by a spirit that makes him mute (Mark 9:17)
3. Perceived as a lunatic that was very ill (Matthew 17:15)
4. Dashed him to the ground, foaming at the mouth; grinding teeth; stiffens out (Mark 9:18); screams, convulsions and continuous mauling (Luke 9:39)

5. Caused him to fall into the fire and water (Matt. 17:16) leaving him scarred
6. This all happened from childhood (Mark 9:21)

To make matters worse, this desperate dad had appealed to the other 9 disciples to heal his son, and they could not! What a change of events! This caused Jesus to come back with a terse and direct statement "***O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you. Bring your son here.***" In Mark's narrative the father responded "If you are able", which Jesus replied "all things are possible for those who believe." The father then cried what we often cry out, "***I believe. Help my unbelief!***" The issue, always, was a matter of faith, or lack thereof. It was the latter that caused the disciples to fail in their ability to help this father. But how did this happen, or how does it still happen to us?

- **Great Hindrance to Greatness**

Faithlessness

The disciples truly believed that they could do it, so it was not the fact that they lacked faith in general, but lacked faith in the **proper object**. Faithlessness is really just **self-confidence** dressed up. The first time they cast out a demon, I'm sure they were nervous which forced dependency. But each successive and successful exorcism gave them more and more confidence. However, instead of radically dependent confidence, they began to think **they possessed the strength themselves**.

Isn't this how we approach life far too often? Sure there are days and times in our lives that we exercise a high level of dependence (tragedy, worry, uncertainty, etc), but in the day to day we easily drift into thinking that somehow we can do this whole thing on our own. We've done it before, we can do it again. We've taught, counseled, witnessed, and served before, so this next time will be no sweat as we slowly drift toward our own greatness.

But how do we diagnose if this happening? There is a very simple test and the results are clear, quick, and easy to read.

Prayerlessness

Jesus told the disciples that they not only lacked faith in this situation (Matt. 17:20), but they lacked prayerfulness (Mark 9:29). *Prayer too often is the last resort and the first thing to go.* Let's be clear, we are not talking about prayer at meal or bed time (though this too is good). We are talking about dependent, relentless, continuous prayer. Prayer for every situation, person, and as a means of praising God for His greatness. We often lack prayer because it may seem it lacks tangible effects, or it does not produce immediate results, or we simply think WE need to DO something, and prayer does not accomplish that. But true greatness, the type that Jesus championed, cannot be attained without persistent prayer. **Prayer is a temperature gauge of whose greatness we really strive for.** When we are seeking our own glory, prayer will be relegated to pithy times and amounts. When we seek God's glory to His praise, prayer will overflow from our lips.

Greatness Delayed (9:43b-45)

But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ "Let these words sink into your ears: **The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.**" ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

The disciples struggled with the same deep seated one we do: we want it all, and we want it now (the old Veruca Salt disease- "*I want a golden goose daddy, I want a golden goose now!*"). They were ready

to move on to the final part of the plan, but Jesus reminded them that greatness in His kingdom went travelled down the path to Calvary. **Before there could be coronation there had to be a cross.** His Kingdom was first about purchasing people by death on a cross before He returned to rule on this earth. This means we know the greatness of Jesus in salvation from our sins, and its this greatness that we proclaim. But we wait for His greatness to displayed by ruling this earth. Until then, we **sojourn**, we wait, and know that this earth presently is not where our ultimate roots are planted.

Greatness Downplayed (9:46-48)

An **argument** arose among them as to which of them was the **greatest**.⁴⁷ 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.**"

- **King of the Hill argument**

Maybe its only when boys get together (or maybe any group of sinners), but there seems to be a need in our fallen humanity to prove who is the best, who is the greatest. With the disciples you could easily see how this conversation would have come up. Three had been with Jesus on the mountain, nine were unable to cast out a demon and got tongue whipped by Jesus. This is not the last time between now and the cross this argument would come up, and even hours before Jesus died the disciples were arguing over the virtues seating arrangements. The source of their argument had a practical outcome: they were each hoping for a better inheritance of the land when Jesus would rule. They wanted the choice parts, not the perceived lesser areas. At the heart of vying for our own greatness lies **pride**, and pride kills.

Pride focuses on temporal only without seeing eternal implications - Wanting it now

Pride focuses on self accomplishment (and proclaims it) sometimes in the name of God's glory, but truly only for self promotion or trying to gain value

Pride relies on self to make things happen - if I don't do it, it won't get done

Pride forgets or nullifies the ongoing need of the grace the gospel offers. We need grace precisely because we CANNOT DO ANYTHING to glorify God apart from it.

- **Necessity of Humility**

Matthew 18:3 - Truly I say to you, unless you turn **and become like children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever **humbles himself like this child** is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Mark 9:35 - If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

Children were not regarded highly in this culture. In fact, the disciples would rebuke the fact that parents tried to get their kids access to Jesus (Luke 18:15-17). Though they were loved and cherished, a child was the smallest and most powerless person in Jesus' culture, to the point that spending time with children (until they were old enough for schooling) was a waste of time. If the disciples believed that greatness was achieved by the company one keeps, Jesus blew that thought out of the water. True greatness was achieved by following the example of both **children and Jesus**

Greatness of a child - A child was least in the culture. They knew it, and could do nothing about it. They were totally dependent on those around them, could not look to accomplishment for value, but could simply find assurance in their position and continue to grow into adulthood. Jesus said that it was this type humility was not only the measure of greatness, but the mark of being a part of God's kingdom. In

other words, what the gospel does to and for us is levels us at the point of the cross. We examine who we truly are in light of God's glory and are left with the stark reality that we have nothing to offer except the fact that Christ died on our behalf. This is the mindset we carry with us the rest of our lives, knowing that we are *children of God, maturing in that reality but never moving away from it.*

Greatness of Jesus - Jesus Himself exemplified what He taught. "***For even the Son of Man came to to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.***" (Mark 10:45). Jesus served us through His sacrificial death not simply as an act of service but **from** a position of a servant. **This is a pivotal distinction in this discussion!** We do not serve (each other, this world) as an act, but do so from a positional reality of our identity. One who identifies as a servant does not recoil when he is treated like one. One who simply serves will have a limit of service, will ask when does it end, when is it my turn, and will resent when people actually treat him like a servant. **Greatness in the economy of the kingdom IS NOT ABOUT the amount of service one provides** (that's how we grade), but on the **embracing of the reality that we actually are servants.**

- **Defining characteristics**

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Here is the freeing part of all of this. As believers we possess (or are possessed) a glory that is unveiled in Christ (as opposed to Moses in Exodus 34 that had to be veiled). **As we grow in Christ, He possesses more and more of our life, His glory will shine forth, and we will shine like the stars** (Hughes). That is the key to greatness: it is not measured by how much or even what I can accomplish for God, but how much He possesses us, how dependent on Him we are, and how yielded to His glory our life exemplifies.

In our economy of greatness, those who are limited (either through diseases, taking care of children or parents, or simply by personality/gifting) cannot attain greatness. However in God's economy, the people who are limited in these areas have the ability to be the greatest in the kingdom.

Chuck Colson wrote about this in relation to his understanding of greatness before He was a believer and then after:

"I vividly recall a glimpse...from my White House days. One brisk December night as I accompanied the president from the Oval Office in the West Wing of the White House to the Residence, Mr. Nixon was musing about what people wanted in their leaders. He slowed a moment, looking into the distance across the South Lawn, and said, "The people really want a leader a little bigger than themselves, don't they, Chuck?" I agreed. "I mean someone like de Gaulle," he continued. "There's a certain aloofness, a power that's exuded by great men that people feel and want to follow."

Jesus Christ exhibited none of this self-conscious aloofness. He served others first; He spoke to those to whom no one spoke;; he dined with the lowest members of society; He touched the untouchables. He had no throne, no crown, no bevy of servants or armored guards. A borrowed manger and a borrowed tomb framed His early life.

Kings and presidents and prime ministers surround themselves with minion who rush ahead, swing the doors wide, and stand at attention as they wait for the great to pass. Jesus said that He Himself stand at the door and knocks, patiently waiting to enter our lives.”¹

Questions to Consider:

How does Jesus’ definition of greatness differ from what is commonly held in our world and even the church?

What are the marks of faithlessness?

If you examined your prayer life, what story would it tell of your belief of God's greatness and necessity of dependency?

How do we measure and exemplify greatness?

How do we know if we are maturing in Christ? What are the marks? What does it look like? What are false ways that we try to measure it?

What does it mean that we take on the positional reality of a servant? How does that change our outlook of service, others, and ourselves (see Luke 17:7-10 for other clues)?

¹ Chuck Colson, “Kingdoms in Conflict”, p. 85.