

# True Greatness

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Preacher: Brian King

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray. Father, I just pray now that as I stand here in the pulpit to proclaim your word, help me to do so in dependence on you.

Please use my weakness so that your name might be glorified. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, what is greatness?

According to the experts, greatness can be quite subjective, like beauty. It differs from person to person and culture to culture. So this week, I thought I'll do what's currently the popular thing to do and ask the artificial intelligence chatbot, ChatGPT, to imagine what Donald Trump, Walt Disney, and Michael Jordan would say if asked that question.

So here is Donald Trump's imagined reply according to ChatGPT. Greatness, folks, is all about being a winner. Greatness means making deals that no one else can make, creating tremendous wealth.

It's about being a tough leader, never backing down and leaving your mark. Now, definitely sounds like something Trump would say, doesn't it? Or here's Walt Disney.

[ 1 : 16 ] Greatness, my friends, is about unleashing the power of imagination and bringing dreams to life. It's about capturing the hearts of audiences and sparking joy and wonder, creating magical experiences for people.

What about Michael Jordan? Greatness, my fellow competitors, is about pushing yourself to the absolute limit and achieving excellence.

It's about relentless dedication, unmatched skill, and an unyielding passion for your craft. Greatness means rising above challenges, surpassing your own limitations, and consistently performing at the highest level.

So that's my interesting thought experiment of the week, courtesy of ChatGPT. And I would say their thoughts are reasonable representation of much of the world's population.

But what about Jesus? What would Jesus say? Well, today we don't really have to imagine and ask ChatGPT because we have the very words of Jesus himself to go on.

[ 2 : 31 ] And in truth, his definition of greatness counts the most. After all, if Jesus is Messiah, if Jesus is Lord, his definition of greatness isn't just one man's subjective opinion.

It's not an artificially generated judgment. No, what he says will be beyond question. And in today's passage, Jesus gives us an insight into what true greatness is.

So today we're going to look at three little episodes that help flesh out what true greatness in God's kingdom is really all about. So let's take the first episode from verses 37 to 45.

Now Jesus, you might remember from last week, has been up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John. And up there they've gotten a glimpse of heaven.

Jesus became radiant as the disciples saw him in all his glory. But in verse 37, as they come down, it's back to reality.

[ 3 : 38 ] There's a crowd. And in that crowd is a man with his son. His only son. Sounds familiar?

It sounds like Jairus and his daughter back in chapter 8. It sounds like the widow and her only son back in chapter 7. You see, up the mountain might be heaven.

But most of us live down here. In this world. Where we face hardships. Tragedies. And this man is no different.

For what is wrong with his son? He screams. He has convulsions. He foams at the mouth. In other words, sounds like epilepsy.

But Luke says that this is not just someone having an illness. It appears that he is suffering from some sort of demonic attack. So what we have is an evil spirit who takes him, shakes him, is intent on breaking him.

[ 4 : 48 ] And his condition has left his father at breaking point. How desperate he must feel. Where can he find help? And if that wasn't enough, as one commentator pointed out, this evil also threatens to leave this man with no heirs and brings shame to his family.

So here is a descent from glory to agony. But the father, though desperate, is in the right place. His heart and his faith is right where they should be. His heart is for his son. And his faith is in the son.

He goes straight to Jesus. And what we discover is that he's actually already been looking for Jesus. But since Jesus has been up on the mountain, no surprise that he hasn't located him yet. But he has found the next best thing. Jesus' disciples. Who, don't forget, back in chapter 9, verse 1, has been given the authority to carry out Jesus' ministry.

[ 6 : 00 ] But there's a problem. Verse 40. He says, I beg your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.

So that's puzzling. What exactly is the problem? Well, the clue seems to be in the reply that Jesus gives in verse 41.

You unbelieving and perverse generation. Why such strong words? What's going on here? Well, first of all, let's identify who Jesus is talking to exactly.

Is he rebuking the father? But wait a minute. Jesus mentions a generation rather than an individual. Additionally, although this is hidden from our English translations, the you in verse 41 is actually plural, not singular.

So Jesus doesn't seem to be singling out the father for condemnation. And besides, hasn't he already shown the right kind of faith in coming to Jesus? And just as an aside, this should bring us relief.

[ 7 : 15 ] You see, sometimes we get people passing by who claim to be Jesus' representatives, who say that they are powerful healers in his name. And of course, such so-called healers attract many who are struggling, many who need hope.

But when the disease doesn't go away, these healers often imply that the fault is with the person who is seeking the healing. They say, oh, I'm sorry, brother or sister, you didn't have enough faith. Or they say, oh, the healing is available, but the manifestation of healing is not there because you didn't really believe when you tried to speak against the disease.

But that is not Jesus. Jesus does not blame the father. So who is Jesus addressing? Is it the crowd?

Now, certainly some people in the crowd deserve Jesus' rebuke. We're not told this in Luke, but in Mark, we know there are teachers of the law in the crowd, and clearly that is a group that have no faith in Jesus.

[ 8 : 26 ] But Luke doesn't give any hint that, on the whole, the crowd is blameworthy in any way. So that leaves just one more candidate.

It is the disciples themselves who are being rebuked here. So what's the issue? Well, again, the phrasing gives us a clue.

When Jesus says, you faithless and perverse generation, he is actually using words straight from the Old Testament. For that is how the first Exodus generation were sometimes described.

For example, in Deuteronomy 32. What was that generation guilty of? Moses tells us. That was a generation that failed to trust God in the end.

They doubted his faithfulness and trustworthiness at certain points and his ability to provide at other points.

[ 9 : 32 ] They did not depend on him. And Jesus now says the disciples are guilty of the same mistake.

After all, hasn't Jesus just provided an abundance of bread back in chapter 9, verse 10 to 17, just like God did back in the Exodus? Hasn't Jesus just shown some of his disciples his glory on a mountain in 9, verse 28 to 36?

Just as God showed Moses back in Exodus. But like the Exodus generation, they didn't depend on him.

In Mark's retelling of this same episode, he shows us that the disciples were more interested in arguing than praying. Perhaps the success of their earlier mission had gotten into their heads somewhat, and they were beginning to believe their own press.

Maybe they thought that they were great enough to do what Jesus does without Jesus present. You see, sometimes that's what we think true greatness is.

[10:49] Being like Jesus without needing Jesus. Subconsciously, we think that spiritual maturity is all about getting to a point where we can do what Jesus does.

But on our own, we don't have to depend on him so much. After all, aren't children supposed to grow up to be independent? And so perhaps at one time, when asked to prepare a Bible study, to lead a Bible study, you totally had no clue what to do.

Or how to help people understand the Word better. And so, you prayed like mad. You cried out to Jesus. You said, help me. Because otherwise, how can?

I have no idea how to do this. But now you say, oh, I have a lot more knowledge now. I bought a few good commentaries. I got training from Pastor Brian, how to lead a group.

So now, I have grown. And the days of fervent prayer and dependence are left behind. Or we think, ayuh, I'm going through so many trials right now.

[12:04] I feel like crying every single night. I don't know what to do. How I wish I'll get to the point where when trials come my way, I wouldn't cry so much.

I always know what the right decision is to make. I'm as strong as those Christians I always read about in those mission biographies. But Jesus says, you've got it all wrong.

What does greatness look like in my kingdom? Well, it never looks like independence from Jesus. The goal of the Christian life is never to get to a point where we are less weak and we feel like we don't need Jesus so much.

Now, that's not to say that growing in Bible knowledge and having commentaries and knowing how to lead study groups or having emotional maturity or wisdom are bad things in themselves.

They are clearly good to pursue. But greatness in God's kingdom never comes at the expense of dependence. It never means that we discard the experience of weakness.

[13:24] Because greatness is really about trusting God to do what only He can do. But what can Jesus do?

Verse 42. Jesus rebukes the impure spirit, heals the boy, and gives him back to his father just like he did for the widow back in chapter 7.

And so Luke helps us see what the crowd sees in verse 43. His greatness. And what is really interesting is that the word translated greatness here is the same word Peter will use in 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 16 to describe the transfiguration.

It is as if Luke is saying to us, here is God's glory at work, but don't forget this glory is Jesus' glory, not yours.

So dependence on Him is key. No matter how many years you've been a Christian, no matter your past spiritual success, none of them ever lessens our need for the great saving power of Jesus.

[14:45] But that's not the only lesson from this episode. You see, greatness in God's kingdom is not just about trusting God to do what only He can do, but also in His way.

verse 43. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, He said this to His disciples.

So Jesus is speaking even while the crowds are still oohing and ahing over this latest miracle. And what does He say? Verse 44.

The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of man. You see, once again, Jesus is calling on them not to lose sight of the main lesson from last week.

And so, echoing His Heavenly Father, He says, listen carefully to me. I am heading from glory to agony.

[15:51] Glory comes through sacrifice. And that is how this Messiah is going to be truly great. His power is ultimately going to be exercised through weakness as He is handed over to man to be beaten up and executed.

You see, Jesus might cast out a demon or two right now, but to rid humanity of impurity and beat the devil once and for all in the end, He is going to have to die.

And in doing so, He sets the pattern for what greatness looks like. He shows us that in God's kingdom, true greatness lies in a willingness to stoop down to sacrifice.

sacrifice. So do you want to be truly great in the kingdom? Then sacrificial service is a must.

You see, most of us, myself included, often default to thinking that greatness means going upwards.

when you move upwards from subordinate to manager, when you move upwards from bachelor to master's, when you move upwards from congregation member to elder, you must be moving

towards greatness.

[ 17 : 27 ] But Jesus says, greatness is actually moving in the opposite direction. So let me describe to you some great people.

some of them in our congregation. There is the retiree willing to do regular grocery runs for the lady who has to care for her very sick husband and finds it hard to leave the house.

There is the worker willing to drive long distances to help a student get to church. There is the father making sure to spend some time reading the Bible with his son after a long, hard day.

This is sacrificial service and this, Jesus says, is greatness. And all this, of course, requires you and I to pay a price, whether that's in terms of energy or money or time.

Sacrifice, by definition, is costly. But someone always has to pay the price. If the retiree doing grocery runs isn't willing to pay the price, then the carer has to.

[ 18 : 50 ] If the worker isn't willing to pay the price, then the student has to. And when we look to Jesus, we realise that's where his greatness truly lies.

for that is what Jesus does for us. When Jesus talks about going to be delivered over in verse 44, he is really saying this, my disciples, I am going to pay the price.

Because if I don't, you will. Either I die for your sin, or you will die for your sin. someone has to pay the price.

But I choose to, Jesus says, because I love you. For love is always sacrifice shape. Sacrifice is essential to love.

And that's how greatness is defined according to Jesus. It is characterised by a willingness to die for others. But the disciples don't get it, verse 45.

[ 20 : 00 ] The cross is still in the future at this point, so the meaning is hidden from them. Although I do sometimes wonder, looking at verse 45, whether they actually do have some sort of inkling, what Jesus is hinting at, because they are actually afraid to ask Jesus about it.

So maybe they kind of know what Jesus is going on about, but they are worried about what it might mean for them, so they think to themselves, oh, better not to know. But Jesus isn't going to let them off so easily.

Instead, in the next two mini episodes, he shows how true greatness in God's kingdom is exemplified. So we now arrive at the second episode in verses 46 to 48.

In verse 46, an argument breaks out among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. So here is concrete evidence that they still haven't truly listened to Jesus.

They're still working with the world's paradigm as they debate who's the most qualified, who's the best at casting out demons, who's going to be Jesus' top right hand man when he finally conquers all his enemies.

[ 21 : 19 ] enemies. It's a paradigm that we're still familiar with aren't we? Who's got the top drawer job, the highest salary, who has the best connections?

And sometimes we import that thinking into church too. Who's got the highest profile ministry, who's the best preacher, the best visionary? Now, I'm not sure how openly the disciples did all this in front of Jesus, but even if they tried to be discreet in their words, verse 47, Jesus knows what's really going on inside of them.

So Jesus has to teach them. And this time he decides to engage in a little show and tell. He brings a little child before the disciples.

Now, it's really important here to understand how children are perceived in the culture of that time. Otherwise, we will misunderstand Jesus' point.

Today, children are often associated with innocence. But, back then, children are associated with insignificance.

[ 22 : 33 ] Little children have no status, no rights, no power, no position. no anything. They were at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

They are total nobodies. But, Jesus puts the little boy besides him and says this, verse 48, whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

in one sentence, Jesus draws a straight line from this little child to himself. How can it be?

The disciples must be asking. Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. So, how can serving a lowly child be on equal footing with serving Jesus and God?

But, Jesus says, that's how it is in my kingdom. Do you want to be truly great? Then, stop arguing and start serving.

[ 23 : 49 ] More than that, start serving all those that everyone else thinks insignificant. Start serving those whom people call weak and worthless.

You see, if you've been in church for any amount of time, the idea of serving others probably isn't new to you. But, what is our default setting?

It is to serve those who will serve us back. It is to help those who, down the line, might be able to help you back.

It's to give yourself to someone whom you think might benefit yourself. Maybe someone who encourages you or compliments you to others. But, those who follow Jesus should have a different default setting.

people became Christians when there was no real social benefit. So, who is Larry Hurtado? He was a long-time historian at the University of Edinburgh.

[ 24 : 56 ] He passed away a number of years ago. And, as a historian, he was very interested in this question. Why is it that in the first few centuries after Jesus' time, people became Christians when there was no real social benefit to them?

After all of you became a Christian, you were often persecuted. And, why did they go on to serve those in society who often brought them no benefit?

And, he said, after considering a few alternative explanations, that he could only come up with one plausible answer. Other religions said, you have to work hard, you have to prove yourself worthy, then you get favour from God.

But, he realised Christianity said differently. It said that, in myself, I am unworthy, but because Jesus sacrificed himself for me, in Christ, I am absolutely loved without condemnation.

And, her title says, that is the big reason why people became Christians and poured themselves out in looking out for others, even those without any status, or who benefited them.

[ 26 : 23 ] In a nutshell, it was the gospel. Because, God in Christ welcomed us when we showed ourselves unworthy, so those who bear his name do the same for others.

Or, to put it another way, we do verse 48 because of verse 44. So, as gospel shaped people today, let's welcome those who are unseen, those who are on the outside, those who are neglected.

Well, you could do it right after Sunday service today, by looking out for people who are on their own, whom no one is talking to, who are perhaps new to us and still figuring things out.

You could do it by being willing to serve in our Sunday school, even if the kids or even the parents sometimes don't give you the appreciation you hope for.

And when God sees your concern for others, whoever they are, and sees that you are not seeking recognition for yourselves, he says, here is greatness.

[ 27 : 42 ] But there is still more to learn, which is why we have the third episode in verses 49 and 50. John says, verse 49, Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he is not one of us.

Now, here is the issue. John, presumably together with the other 11 disciples, think of themselves as the special ones. Oh, aren't they the designated apostles?

Aren't they the ones who have been given all authority to preach the kingdom and heal the sick?

But now, John wants to preserve the privileges and honour only for themselves.

And when he sees someone else doing the same in Jesus' name, he says, no way, that's not allowed. We're the great ones.

And perhaps he felt a bit piceh as well because don't forget, the disciples have just failed to cast out a demon. But now here is someone successfully doing it.

[ 28 : 53 ] So maybe they felt a bit threatened, they felt a bit insecure, and so John lashes out. And sadly, it is possible for us to do that today.

Over the past couple of years, we've welcomed our brother polling to our pulpit a number of times. As you know, he's leading a church plant, Redemption Church, Kuching.

In fact, their public launch is today. it's not a BEM church. And let's say, as he preaches the true gospel, his church grows exponentially in the next two years.

Lots of young people go to his church, non-Christians are converted. Meanwhile, here in KEC, we're struggling to retain people, and our Christianity Explored Corps is not bearing the kind of fruit that we hope for.

And it would be quite tempting for me to say, hey, we're the more established church. Well, who do you think you are? Stop intruding on our territory.

[ 30 : 02 ] Stop taking advantage of our generosity. And since you're not from our denomination, you must be a bit suspicious. Well, that would be me being John.

And so, as the 19th century Bishop J.C. Rao nicely puts it on the screen, the conduct of John and the disciples on this occasion is a curious illustration of the sameness of human nature in every age.

Thousands in every period of church history have spent their lives in copying John's mistake. They have laboured to stop every man who will not work for Christ in their way from working for Christ at all.

They have imagined in their petty self-conceit that no man can be a soldier of Christ unless he wears their uniform and fights in their regiment.

But Jesus says in the kingdom of God, there is no monopoly on gospel work. Verse 50. Don't stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you.

[ 31 : 16 ] Now, clearly this man was a genuine disciple because if he was a false teacher, Jesus would have said differently. But he's not.

And so celebrate what he's doing. He is on team Jesus too. After all, isn't gospel work ultimately about giving Jesus the glory and not ourselves?

Imagine, and I know for some of you, you don't have to imagine, imagine that you have an impossible amount of work on your plate.

There's just so much to do and no way that you can do it all alone. Wouldn't you welcome extra hands to help you? Well, Jesus says, exactly.

It's not about competition. In fact, the only time the New Testament talks about competition, it says, outdo one another in showing honour. Don't fight about who's greater.

[ 32 : 21 ] Fight about celebrating the greatness of the other if they are also on team Jesus. So let's sum up.

What is true greatness? It's trusting and depending on God to do what only he can do in his way. And so true greatness is about sacrificial service.

It is about welcoming the insignificant and working as one team, not about fighting over status. But perhaps as we read this passage, we also feel the sting.

Because this passage is as much about the failure of the disciples as it is about what true greatness is. And perhaps right now as we read of their failures, we can't help but see our own failures as well. After all, how many of us have struggled with the fact that we know that we've done God's work badly because we didn't depend on Jesus?

[ 33 : 34 ] Well, I certainly have. I thought a lot about the times when I haven't preached or counseled particularly well, when I should have made a different leadership decision, when I failed to confront problems as I should, maybe because I tried to do them without Jesus.

Or how many of us have struggled with the temptation to self-promote? We want recognition and appreciation for what we have done and embarrassingly, sometimes when we didn't get it, we started sulking.

We said, well, if no one says thank you, I'll stop doing it. We become childish and we expose where our heart truly is.

Or how many of us have just been slow to understand what God is doing in our lives. We read our Bibles but we're struggling to understand his purposes and we're afraid to go ask God about it. And when we look back at our failures, we groan and we ask, how can Jesus put up with this? Maybe he doesn't.

[ 34 : 52 ] Maybe I failed once too many times and he's given up. Well, if that is you, then come back with me and look again at verse 41.

Upon hearing of the disciples' failure, what does Jesus ask? How long shall I stay with you and put up with you? And we think, uh-oh, Jesus is reacting exactly the way I thought he would.

But let's think about his actions. How does his actions answer that question? Well, how long does Jesus put up with his disciples? For one thing, long enough to help the person in need.

He doesn't say, well, you go clean up your own mess. Since you think you're so great, well, you go and try to cast out the demon again by yourselves. Don't.

He shows grace and he deals with the mess. He heals the man's son. Then let us ask one more time.

[ 36 : 08 ] How long does Jesus put up with his disciples? And here is a second answer. Long enough to go to the cross for their sake.

Jesus doesn't say, ah, you know what, God, these people aren't worth my sacrifice. They're so immature, so slow, so childish. Ah, let's just forget about them. No, on the contrary, he says, he must go to the cross.

It's what we most need. And he does it. And after Jesus dies and rises again, we're told in Luke 24, that's when people's minds began to be opened.

That's when people understood what all this truly meant. And that's where people foresaw for themselves true greatness. You see, this is the greatness of our God, that he has all the power, all the authority, but he became the least for our sake.

So let's follow him and as one team, strive to serve him sacrificially all our days. Let's pray. Father, Father, as we ponder upon your words in this passage, we just ask again for your help.

[ 37 : 35 ] Father, we know that we are people who have often failed you, who have not done as we ought to. Sometimes we are even like an unbelieving and perverse generation.

But Jesus, thank you that you stick with us. Thank you that you love us. Thank you that you went to the cross for us. And so Father, help us to follow in your footsteps.

Help us to exemplify true greatness in your kingdom. Help us to serve you by serving others for the sake of your name. All this we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.