

True Greatness

Andrew Kneeland, September 19, 2021

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

What makes someone 'great'?

A rider on horseback came across a group of soldiers struggling to lift a heavy log onto a cart. The soldiers were drenched with sweat on the hot and humid summer day.

Nearby, a corporal sat on his own horse, confidently barking orders at his soldiers from the shade of a nearby tree. The rider on horseback saw the soldiers struggling and asked the corporal, "Sir, that looks awfully heavy. Why don't you go help them?"

The corporal let out a pretentious chuckle. "Who me? Certainly not! I'm a corporal!"

The rider on horseback got off his horse and joined the struggling soldiers. "On three, boys!" he calmly ordered. "One, two... three!" The heavy log was lifted into the cart. The man got back on his horse, tipped his hat to the quiet corporal, and rode away.

That rider was George Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and the future President of the United States.

What makes someone 'great'?

Baptist preacher Tommy Burrus told that story, which might have been embellished a little over the years, to teach us that true greatness isn't about rank or power or wealth or fame. That corporal, sitting on his horse in the shade, might have felt that he was great. But that's not what true greatness is.

To find out what truly makes someone great, we're going to look to Jesus this morning.

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling around for some time, performing miracles and preaching and teaching people that following Jesus was the only way to have eternal life.

In Mark 9, Jesus just healed a boy who had an unclean spirit and verse 30 tells us “They went on from there and passed through Galilee.” Then it says “Jesus didn’t want anyone to know” where he was or where he was going. He was a celebrity at that point! Everybody wanted to be where He was and there were already those plotting to take him down. But Jesus knew it wasn’t his time yet. He still had some things He needed to accomplish. And today, he needed to give some much-needed instruction to his disciples about true greatness.

Jesus privately tells his disciples what’s about to happen to him. What He and Father God have been planning. And Jesus uses very plain language to explain it: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

That word “delivered” is the same word as “betrayed.” Jesus was saying that someone is going to betray him, and then he’s going to die. This story is also told in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels and they say that the disciples were hurt when they heard this. They didn’t seem to really know what “he will rise” meant. They were hurt and they were also too afraid to ask Jesus to explain any more.

But Jesus knew exactly what was going on in each of their hearts. He saw their aching hearts but he also saw another emotion: pride. They weren’t just sad and confused about Jesus being betrayed and dying... they also cared about themselves. They were worried about what this news might mean for them.

So with this lingering dread in their hearts they came to Capernaum. This was actually where Jesus lived, with his mother and his siblings. He grew up in Nazareth, but now he lived in Capernaum. And this house they were in would have been Jesus’ house.

So try to picture this in your mind: Jesus is visiting his home and his family for the last time before he goes back to Jerusalem to be crucified. Jesus is the incarnated God, but He’s also fully and completely a human... so you can imagine that this was an emotional time for him. He knew exactly what was going to happen, how much pain he would have to endure, and how *emotionally* painful it would be for everyone around him. He knew how awful his crucifixion would be.

That’s what was on Jesus’ mind. But what were the disciples thinking about?

Verse 34: “Which one of them was the greatest.”

It seems pretty childish, doesn't it? But they still didn't know that Jesus wasn't going to establish an earthly kingdom. They had all read their Bibles, but they still didn't know the grand, master plan that Jesus was sent to accomplish. The master plan that would answer once and for all, “What makes someone truly great?”

This same Jesus who was sitting in front of them had created the entire world in six days out of nothing all for the purpose of showing his glory and He created people to share in this perfect paradise. But the people he lovingly created soon rebelled against him, like children disobeying their parents.

But what happens when your child disobeys you? It breaks your heart, and you long to just pick them up and hug them and to go back to how things were before.

That's exactly how Jesus felt. His children had disobeyed him, and he was on a mission to make things right again. To make a way for his children to come back to him, to be scooped up in his powerful, loving arms and forgiven. Just like He had created the entire world in six days out of nothing, He would create forgiveness and faith in our hearts *out of nothing*, and fix what was broken.

To make things go back to the way they were before all of this pain. Before all this bad news that gets worse every day, all this injustice and brokenness and tyranny and oppression. He wanted to make things the way they were before all of this suffering. Back when everything was *good*.

That's what Jesus was about to do. Jesus was about to show the world what *true* greatness looked like. A truly great Savior doing a selfless, sacrificial, and *great* act of love. But what were his disciples arguing about? Which one of *them* was the greatest.

These twelve disciples were jealous and envious men. Just like we are. They had seen Jesus take Peter, James, and John aside privately a couple of different times and they were jealous. They had heard Jesus call Peter “the rock” on which he'll build his church, and they were jealous. They were all jealous of each other. They all wanted to be the greatest. They all wanted the highest rank and

the most fame and the best status.

But greatness to Jesus is nothing like greatness to the world. Jesus said: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” That’s what *true* greatness was.

True greatness is loving other people more than yourself. It is putting aside what *you* might want and instead doing what’s best for someone else. True greatness isn’t about becoming the most famous, accumulating the most wealth, having the best health or the most freedom or the most security or the most comfort. True greatness means being willing to give all of that up.

In fact, most of us *will* have to give all of that up. We’re Christians who live in a world where Satan is ruling. We don’t belong here. Things are difficult for us here, and they’re only going to get more difficult.

Paul writes about these hard times in 2 Corinthians 4. He says: “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.”

Jesus was truly great. And he calls us to also be truly great, as we follow his example and cling to him for our support and our salvation.

In the next verse, Jesus gave his disciples a visual illustration. He calls a little child over to where they all are sitting on the ground. He picks up the little boy and you can imagine the love and joy in his eyes. Jesus loves the little children, doesn’t he?

In those days it wasn’t a glamorous job, taking care of children. Even today it’s still not something that we would say is a “great” job. Taking care of children is a messy job. It’s long days and short nights. It’s exhausting, doesn’t pay anything, and there are no sick days.

But Jesus says that receiving a little child -- taking care of a little child -- is what makes someone truly great. It’s a picture for what true greatness is: selfless, sacrificial, costly, sometimes painful. But always putting someone else above yourself.

That's how Jesus loves us, isn't it? Sacrificially, selflessly. At great personal cost, at great personal pain. Putting you and your need for forgiveness above Himself.

What makes someone great? Loving like Jesus loved. Giving up your own plans and your own goals and your own ambitions... and taking on the heart of Christ.

A heart that clings to Christ in childlike faith. A heart that doesn't seek its own interests. Or its own safety. Or its own health or wealth. But a heart that desires more than anything else to know Jesus and to be saved by him.

Amen.