

How to Be Great  
Matthew 18:1-20

What does it mean to be great? When somebody says that someone or some thing is great, what determines its greatness? Recently, I started watching the documentary *The Last Dance* on Netflix. If you don't know, *The Last Dance* is about Michael Jordan's final season with the Chicago Bulls, when they were competing for their second three-peat. There was a lot of turmoil within the team and between the players and management because no one knew what that following offseason would bring. It seemed as though the team would get dismantled. They were going to let go the great coach, Phil Jackson. It seemed as if the franchise was going to hit the restart button. So, at the beginning of that final season, Coach Jackson wrote in big letters on a dry erase board in the locker room, "The Last Dance." This was their last chance to run together as a team and accomplish something great, something only one other team had done before. They were going for their third championship in a row, for a second time. Many people call these Chicago Bulls teams some of the greatest teams to ever play. Of course, these teams were headed up by one of the greatest players to ever play. As you go through this series you learn more and more about what made Michael Jordan and this team so great. They stuck together through thick and thin. They put the work in to accomplish their goals. They remained focused on the goal together. They allowed each player to be their own person. They worked hard. Michael Jordan was a great leader that pushed his team to be better. He never let up. He was relentless. He was solely focused on winning and if anyone wasn't, they were out. The whole team shared that goal and that's what made them great.

What makes someone great? I think that is a longing in the heart of every person to be considered great, to be seen as great, and it isn't just limited to sports. People want to be great at their jobs. They want to be great parents and siblings. They want to be great at their hobbies and leisure activities. They want to be known for having a great sense of humor or personality. That's just it, they want to be known. They want to stick out. They want people to acknowledge their skills and abilities. We work hard to seek the affirmation of people that we are indeed great. So, we work our way up at our jobs to be seen great at what we do. We put in the work in sports or school work. We want to be great athletes, great scholars. We want to be great. We look at the world and we use many measurements to determine that greatness. We have awards and award shows, scholarships and academic titles, banquets of recognitions. Each sport has its own Hall of Fame to celebrate the truly great athletes that have come along. We have Mount Rushmore that has the faces of some of our greatest presidents on it. We have memorialized greatness in the naming of parks and the marking of graves. It is something everybody works toward. We want a lasting legacy. We want to be considered great, to be considered something, to be considered worthy of greatness. We aspire to greatness. What makes someone great?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus' disciples are also pursuing greatness. We are in chapter 18 so we have seen a majority of the story of Jesus to this point. The disciples have seen a lot at this point in their journey. They know what greatness is, they've seen it in Jesus. They've seen him heal the sick, bring the dead back to life. He's taught them with parables. He's shown them with miracles. This is what greatness is. In the midst of that, they've also been shown what the kingdom of God is all about. Yet, here are the disciples walking with Jesus and they decide to ask him, "who is the greatest?" Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God? You wonder if the disciples were bantering back and forth about this, arguing about their positions at the table when they ate or the duties assigned to each as they traveled. You wonder if they jockeyed for position among themselves. How can I be the greatest among the twelve? How can I be the greatest in God's eyes? I want to aspire to that. I want to be that. I want to be known as that. I want to be seen as great in the eyes of Jesus, in the eyes of the world. Now, I'm riding with Jesus. I'm one of his crew and I recognize being with him makes me great but if I could be considered for his right or left hand in the eternal kingdom of God that would set me above the rest. Jesus, who is the greatest?

But Jesus surprises his followers. He surprises us, his readers who are immersed in a world chasing after greatness. He tells us that greatness isn't what you think. It isn't measured by the world's standards. Greatness looks differently than you'd expect and you acquire it, you earn it by doing things that make you less than great. As you walk through the reading, these twenty verses for today, Jesus teaches us that being great to God is far from the world's standards of greatness. In fact, we can compare these two lists as we walk through the pericope. He talks about humility as a mark of greatness. It makes me think of Muhammed Ali, towering over Sonny Liston in that famous black and white photo, declaring himself to be the greatest. Yet, in God's kingdom it is humility that makes you great. The ability to resist temptation sets one apart for greatness. We see in our world today that great people can do whatever they want. They can get away with whatever they want, using their greatness as a "get out of jail free" card. Not in God's kingdom. In God's kingdom we are called to resist temptation. That's what makes us great. Greatness comes from caring for the lost and lowly, thinking outside and beyond ourselves. It isn't the pursuit of my needs but the sacrifice for the one in need. Finally, the last thing that makes us great is forgiveness. Great people do not hold sins over people's heads. We do not use shame as a power grab or as leverage to move ourselves up in the world. We are great when we forgive. We are greatest when we shrug off our need for revenge and forgive. So let's look at these things a bit closer, shrug off the calls of the world, and see what greatness truly is in the kingdom of God.

You might see a pattern in what is often considered great in our world. All of the pursuits of greatness are often rooted in two great sins from scripture. Two particular incidents in scripture are perfect examples of how we fail to be great, even as we pursue greatness. We can trace our chase for greatness to the Tower of Babel and the tree in the garden. We want to make a name for ourselves. We want to build monuments to our own accomplishments. We want to be known for our strength, our resilience, our victories. That's the root sin in Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be on God's level and they would show they were by flexing their muscles. We want to be like God, too. That's the temptation that Adam and Eve fall for in the Garden of Eden. They desire in their hearts to be like God. They want to be in control of their own universe. They want to be all powerful. They want to be worshiped. They want to make the rules and make people subservient to them. Ultimately, these are the roots of our pursuits for greatness. We want to be known. We want to be venerated. We want our egos stroked. Well, as much as we shout and show off, we know that you can't just declare yourself great. You've either got to earn it or you've got to be given the title. That's how it goes. That's what the world expects. Think about the list from Matthew 18 again. Is that how God determines greatness? Is that how we are given that title of "great"? Our sinful nature pushes towards a different kind of thinking, a different type of pursuit. What would God have us do?

In Christianity, we have this absurd notion that the least of us are the greatest. We make this ridiculous proposition that if you want to be great, you become a servant. The last are first and the first are last in the eternal kingdom of God. As we listen to Jesus today. As we look at Jesus in his life and death we are compelled to believe that humility, service, and self-denial puts you on the fast track to greatness in His kingdom. We don't have to wonder what equates to greatness. We don't have to be concerned with being elevated above the masses. Instead, we place ourselves at the lowest rung of the ladder, the bottom of the totem pole. We don't seek to socially advance, we advance the kingdom of God through making ourselves lower than others. We reject the temptations to prop ourselves up. We rest in the arms of Jesus instead running to keep up with the Joneses. We fall on our knees in humble confession rather than stand up and justify our sin. We are willing to sacrifice ourselves, whatever that looks like, for the advancement of another. We forgive endlessly, even as the wounds and misdeeds mount up. We declare the mighty deeds of the Lord, not the accomplishments of man. As John the baptizer confesses in John 3:30, "He must become greater, I must become less." Not only must I elevate my savior above my own needs but also my neighbor.

I have this book in my office by N.T. Wright entitled *How God Became King*. He writes this book to remind you and me that Jesus Christ became king of all creation not by sitting on a throne adorned with jewels, surrounded by servants but as he was pinned in place on the old, rugged cross, surrounded by his tormentors. Jesus shows us greatness as he allows himself to be captured, beaten, unjustly sentenced, and killed on a Roman instrument of death. In his life, Jesus humbled himself before others. He allowed his reputation to be muddied by his association with sinners. He knelt down to wash the feet of his followers. He spoke with the outcasts, the unclean, the lowly and sinful. He forgave and proclaimed forgiveness when others were only silent. His forgiveness extended all the way to Calvary as his blood spilled as a flood that washed away all sin forever. You want to know what greatness looks like? Look at the disfigured and breathless body of Christ, suspended over the creation he once called good, cursed by the people he was born to save. All of this done not for his benefit, but for the rescue and redemption of the worst of us. You and me. Sinners headed straight to death and hell forever. Rescued from the clutches of the devil by the humble act of self sacrifice by Jesus on the cross.

So, you want to be great? Learn to die. Learn to die to self, die to self justification, self edification. Learn to stoop low so that others may feel a sense of dignity and self worth. Learn to confess your sins and forgive the sins of others. Learn to avoid temptation and serve those who are exhausted by their circumstances and the broken systems of this world. Be last when every bit of you is pushing you to be at the front of the line. Be least when every bit of you is pushing to be acknowledged and praised. Be willing to give up what you have, the things you feel you are owed, the things you feel set you apart for greatness so that others may experience the love and mercy of Christ. That's how you become great. That's how you attain greatness in the kingdom of God. And it isn't something we announce or declare or wear on our chests or hang on our walls. It is something God proclaims when we finally meet him face to face. "Well done good and faithful servant." Amen.