

Let Me Be Great

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[0 : 00] Famed hip-hop artist Kanye West wrote in all caps, mind you, Yo, won't you let me be great? Please, I beg you, give me a break.

Please, let me be great. Now, hopefully you don't tune me out because I've mentioned Kanye West in the first minute of my sermon. But the only reason I mention Ye is because of this phrase, this let me be great that I started hearing you colloquially in conversations, particularly among younger people.

I was so struck by the phrase that I was intrigued to find out where it had originated. So I went on the mad hunt, as my age group does. I went to Google, and I Googled, tried to figure out where this phrase came from.

And after no luck with Wikipedia nor Elren Dictionary, it was Time Magazine that said it was first used by Kanye West. And it kind of makes sense to me because I don't know if there's a phrase that more epitomizes Kanye West than that phrase.

But Kanye West, there's something about this phrase besides Kanye West that really captures my attention in it because I think it captures the sentiments of popular culture's insatiable desire to be out front and to be in the spotlight.

[1 : 18] I recently came across an article published in Forbes magazine that referenced a survey done that said one out of every four young people would quit their job in exchange for fame.

And a third of them would rather be famous than become a lawyer. 23% would rather become famous than a doctor. And one out of 10 of them would choose fame over a college degree. And get this, one out of 12 would cut off their family to become a household name. But beyond those stats, the phrase simply hints to the climate of self-promotion and self-admiration that seems so pervasive in our culture, and it's just become embraced as normal.

However, I would suspect that this phrase, let me be great, probably is not the mindset that drives and motivates most of you in the room, although it may be for some. But this phrase, let me be great, it got me to thinking, is greatness something that I should be aspiring to?

Should I be looking for opportunities to be great? What does it even really mean to be great? It appears to me, and probably obvious to you, that our society and our culture, in a subtle way, endeavors to condition us to assume that greatness is associated with status, with position, with title, with rank, with talent, with fame, with wealth, with prestige.

[2 : 47] But what if our culture is wrong about those things? And what if our society's understanding of what it means to be great is off? Does that mean that we should avoid being great?

While many of us may recognize that the ascent up the hill of what our culture puts forward as greatness might be slightly off base, perhaps we should consider whether there's another ascent for us to set our sights on.

Now, as I say all of this, I know many of you, like me, would profess that we believe what the scriptures reveal, that Jesus tells us whoever wants to be great must be servant. But as I'm honest with you and admit it, I have serious trouble with this sometimes.

It's a challenge for me sometimes to be a servant when in the middle of the night my wife wants me to go get a bottle for our one-year-old. But from what I've observed, I'm not the only one who struggles with this, who follows Jesus.

Often times it seems as if Christians have this certain aversion to servanthood and we even seem to be allergic to serving. We have this certain aversion to aspiring to be great, even as Jesus defines greatness.

[3 : 55] But what our passage today illustrates for us is that there's this secret, this truth that Jesus lets us in on. And when he lets us in on this truth, it redefines what greatness is.

And as he lets us in on this secret, he is actually offering us one of the most beautiful, liberating, and helpful truths. Indeed, he is offering us what I would say is a better way, but really it's much more than just a better way.

It's actually the best way. It's actually the more blessed way. Listen again, if you will, to what Jesus says after he finishes washing his disciples' feet in verses 15 to 17.

He says, For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is the messenger greater than the one who sent him.

But here's verse 17. Listen closely. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. See, Jesus is bidding us. He said, consider a more blessed way, a more beautiful way.

[5 : 02] Even though many of you would not ascribe to Kanye West's idea of what greatness is, more of us than would probably admit, we oftentimes fall prey to the aspirations for title, and for position, and for wealth, and for power, and for comfort, and convenience, and for titles.

We often fall prey to those aspirations. And so while it may not be new and novel that Jesus redefines what greatness is, perhaps we should consider, once again, this more blessed and more beautiful way.

In order for us to consider this more blessed way, thank you for that amen, I think we need to be reminded, though, of how in the scriptures, Jesus constantly flips the value system of this world on its head.

His kingdom values are mostly the reverse of our culture's value system. Not only does he reveal to us that the great is to be servant, but in Matthew 23, 11, he also said that the one who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Elsewhere, he said that the first will be last. Another occasion, he said that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Here's the thing, folks. Jesus consistently and constantly challenges our notions of what is actually valuable, what is truly significant, and what is really meaningful.

[6 : 34] And most often, he is flipping our culture's value system upside down on its head. In fact, the truth is, Jesus, he came to untangle us from these constricting and deceptive mindsets.

Too often, we rely on the measures of this world to evaluate progress and to evaluate success. And when we use those measures, we need to recognize that they are not the measures that God says we should use to evaluate greatness or success.

Our culture tries to feed us this notion that somehow greatness has to do with how much talent you have, or how famous you are, or what position or rank you have, or what title you have, or how many followers you have, or how many likes you can generate, how much knowledge you have, how many degrees you have, how wealthy you are.

But those measures are not what God says we should use to evaluate greatness or even success. Jesus makes it explicitly clear for us that greatness is directly correlated to serving.

But the good thing about it is that, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put so well, anybody can be great because anybody can serve. In our passage today, I love how John invites us to lean in and peer into this scene by giving us inspired insight and commentary on how Jesus was evaluating this whole situation.

[8 : 01] I want you to notice and I want you to listen to the language John uses to pull our attention to Jesus' assessment and evaluation of what's happening in the room. In verse 1, John tells us that Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

And then in verse 3, John tells us that Jesus, here's the word again, John knew that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God.

And then again, down in verse number 11, John tells us that Jesus knew who was going to betray him. I hope you hear the language that John is using to help us see how Jesus is evaluating and he's assessing the situation.

He's looking around the room and he knows what's going on. The first thing it says that Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands. Listen, y'all know it.

No one else in the room had more than what Jesus did. And Jesus knew it too. Andy Stanley points out that Jesus was the most powerful person in the room.

[9 : 07] No one else in the room had more clout, had more power, and had more authority than Jesus did. One of my good friends, Pastor Patrick Walker, he pastors New Macedonia Baptist Church over in Southeast D.C.

He says it this way, No one has ever been more overqualified for a job than Jesus was for the job of foot washer. But Jesus didn't just evaluate what he had in his hands and that he was the most powerful person in the room, but Jesus also evaluated and assessed his relationships with the Father.

Also in verse 3 it says this, that Jesus knew that he had come from God and that he was going back to God. This speaks to Jesus' relationship with the Father.

Jesus knew that his relationship with the Father was completely solid. He was sure he belonged to his Father and that he was accepted by his Father. And his relationship with the Father was totally secure.

And that his Father's love for him was completely unwavering. There was no doubt that the Father loved Jesus. And Jesus knows that he belongs to the Father and he's fully accepted and loved by the Father.

[10 : 17] And this speaks to Jesus' identity. Because Jesus is assured that he is fully accepted and loved by the Father, it frees him and it liberates him to not care about what other people in the room were going to think of him if he starts to wash the disciples' feet.

Washing the disciples' feet was something that would have been considered to be beneath Jesus and that others would sneer at. But because of the love and the acceptance of his Father, he was supremely satisfied by that love and he did not feel that he needed to be concerned about the approval of anyone else in the room or the acceptance of anyone else in the room, only the acceptance and the approval of the person who counted most.

The Father's opinion was the only opinion that mattered. And as a result, he was able to do something transformational. The assurance of the Father's love gave him the courage to risk his reputation and risk it all.

But also, Jesus assesses and evaluates the timing of it all. In verse number one, it says that Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

Jesus knows that you can't waste time when you have the opportunity to make an eternal impact. There are points in history when we have to seize the moment and make the most of every opportunity.

[11 : 41] Sometimes you can't waste time for a more convenient time because that time may never come. Our days are not promised and they are fleeting. And so we must use time wisely.

But Jesus also assesses who's in the room. Did you notice it down in verse number 11? It says that Jesus knew who was going to betray him. This gives us great insight into how Jesus doesn't just make the decision to serve those that it's most convenient to serve and those with the squeakiest clean track record or even those who Jesus thinks will give him something in return.

Jesus looked in the room and he saw the God Judas who he knew was about to stab him in his back and Jesus still washed his feet.

That wasn't convenient. That wasn't easy. It was the person that was not going to give Jesus anything in return. And yet Jesus assessed the room and still had the courage to do what he did. It takes an assessment and evaluation of who's in the room and to know that he's called to serve those in this world who least deserve it and even when it might be inconvenient to serve them.

[12 : 57] I think we too need to evaluate and assess situations more often. I think we need to assess what's in our hands. Yes, Jesus discovered he had everything in his hands and you're thinking, well, I don't have what Jesus had to offer but you also don't have as much as Jesus did so you don't have as much to lose as Jesus did.

So you should be willing to risk it even quicker than Jesus did. Plus, Jesus really is a concern about how much you have in your hands but rather what do you do with what you have in your hands? I would venture to guess that most of us in this room have more in our hands than we realize. We have more at our fingertips, more influence, more power, more money than we realize. Jesus isn't concerned about how much or how little you have because he can take whatever little means you have and then turn it into something meaningful for somebody else. Because you don't have to have means nor do you have to come from means in order to do something meaningful for Jesus.

I think it's imperative that we evaluate and take honest assessment of what's in our hands and recognize whatever has been placed in our hands. It is all a gift from God.

[14 : 15] And we ought to be careful not to simply use it on ourselves but to leverage it for the sake of others. See, what we're able to see here is that Jesus, because he knew all of these things, because Jesus evaluated and assessed the situation, Jesus was liberated to rise to the occasion.

In fact, Jesus rose to take a knee. Richard Foster in his book, Money, Sex, and Power, he says that true power has as its aim to set people free whereas pride is determined to dominate.

Jesus would take the most menial task reserved for slaves and servants and he would do what most people paid other people to do. He was able to seize the moment to do something even more remarkable than just washing feet.

And I believe that if we evaluate our situations and we see that God, he's been so good to us. We'll see that he has accepted us and he has loved us in spite of ourselves.

And we can seize opportunities to make a difference for somebody else, to serve other people. And perhaps we could even change the trajectory of somebody else's life just like Jesus does for us.

[15 : 37] But after Jesus has this enlightening evaluation of the room, we see Jesus engaging in this exchange with Peter. Jesus engages Peter in this seemingly trivial exchange.

And some of you know it's always Peter that's sticking his foot in his mouth. But I'm actually happy that Jesus indulges Peter and engages in this exchange because of what is revealed as a result of this exchange.

See, I don't know about you, but I'm happy that God will even engage me even when I'm being simple-minded and foolish and ignorant and shallow in my thinking. Because what I have realized is that God can use those times to reveal my foolishness to myself and my ignorance and my simple-mindedness and to show real truth to me and to show me something more powerful than I would ever understand otherwise.

Because of this enlightening, of this exchange, and engaging in this exchange, this enlightening truth comes out of this engaging exchange. Jesus has this exchange with Peter, and he tells Peter, what I am doing for you, it's actually pointing to something else than just washing feet.

It's actually pointing to something else greater than I'm going to do for you, Peter. In verse 8, it goes like this. Peter says to Jesus, Jesus, you're never going to wash my feet.

[16 : 57] And Jesus answers Peter and says, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. See, the enlightening thing that comes out of this exchange that's revealed to us is that if Jesus does not wash us, we are unclean.

Jesus was trying to tell Peter, Peter, if I don't wash you, you are going to remain unclean. You are dirty unless I wash you. See, many people today are not interested in Jesus washing them, and they think it doesn't make sense, but they don't realize that we are all dirty, and we are all unclean when we come before a holy God.

We need to be washed by the blood of Jesus. Peter, you need to have your life washed clean. You need to have your life be made new. And the good news is this, that Jesus sheds his blood to wash us clean.

Hebrews says it so wonderfully, there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood. And I don't know about you, but I'm so glad that Jesus shed his blood to wash me clean.

This washing of the feet isn't just so that we would serve for the sake of serving. It was actually to point us to something greater that Jesus would do, that he would wash us clean. And so we shouldn't serve just for goodness sake.

[18 : 12] We should serve for God's sake. Serve for the gospel's sake. Because really what is happening here is that Jesus is doing this for them in order to reveal the gospel to them.

His actions in serving them in this way, washing their feet, it was actually to put on full display the gospel so that we would see the gospel on full display.

My prayer is that our service to others would be a canvas that puts the gospel on full display. That as we serve people, that people would see the gospel of Jesus Christ because they know that we're not just doing it for goodness sake, but that we're doing it for God's sake.

But don't forget, Jesus knew who was going to betray him. And that's why he says in the next verse, not every one of you are clean. I just humbly say to somebody today, please don't be the one who will not be clean.

Please don't be the one who is unclean. Don't be the one who hears the gospel message and decides to keep your heart hardened. Receive Jesus today.

[19 : 25] Allow him to wash you clean. Allow this message to let you know that Jesus shed his blood for you to clean us and to wash us of our filthy sins and repent and believe on him today, allowing him to wash you clean.

This is your opportunity to receive Jesus. But after Jesus finishes and goes on, he has finished washing the disciples' feet.

In the next few verses, in verse number 12, he says to them, do you understand what I have done for you? That's an interesting question. I think that we need to ask ourselves too.

Do we understand what Jesus has done for us? Has it really sunk in? Do we understand what the cross liberates us from?

That the cross liberates us from the bondage of sin? Do we understand that it makes us clean when we could not clean ourselves? If we understand these things, we ought to follow this example that Jesus gives us.

[20 : 26] We should be asking ourselves, how can I be great? And we should be asking our neighbor, would you let me be great? Maybe that's even something that you can adopt for yourself that people may not understand why you're saying, but you say, would you let me be great and take your plate and put it in the trash?

Would you let me be great and watch your kids for you? Would you let me be great and serve the children? Amen, Jane? Can I get an amen? Amen. Amen. Amen.

Jesus gave us this example, but he closes by saying, if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. See, many of you know these things, but the question is, are we doing what we know? Because if we do them, Jesus says we are blessed. It's a more beautiful way. It's the best way. I recently had one of those invaluable opportunities to hear one of those life-changing stories that leaves a mark on you for the rest of your life.

I was having lunch with two fellow local pastors, one black brother and one white brother, and we were having a conversation around the issues of race and racial reconciliation. As we started by taking turns telling our story and essentially why we felt compelled to invest and carve out time to come to lunch with our busy schedules and meet and engage around this conversation.

[21 : 57] But when he came around to our white brother, he began telling us his story by actually telling us his father's story. He shared with us how his father grew up poor in the panhandle of Florida with a father who was an alcoholic and not very present in his life.

But he would tell us how, in spite of all of that, his father would excel and through some unusual circumstances, he would eventually become Attorney General of the state of Florida. And he would be Attorney General in the state of Florida at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1964.

He would actually help to arrange the safety of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King when he would come into town. In order to give us context for the racial climate of this time, he shared a story how one day his father was taking their black maid home, their maid who was black home, and she was sitting in the back seat.

And as they were driving, they were driving down the road and they came up on a large crowd that was gathered in the road. And it seemed to be a rather unruly crowd. And as he got closer, his father realized what was going on.

His father realized that it was a lynching taking place. He had to turn around and tell his maid who was black to get down as they would drive by. But here's where it got good.

[23 : 14] After serving as Attorney General, his father would move to Tampa, Florida and become a corporate lawyer. And he told us how his dad would become a very well-connected, very highly respected, revered businessman in the Tampa community.

And then he landed the bombshell and he shared how his father was the first corporate executive in Tampa to hire a black lawyer. The black lawyer's name was Charles Wilson.

He hired Charles Wilson as general counsel of the company that his father was vice president of. In addition to that, he told us that his father would later take Charles Wilson to lunch at the all-white golf club that he was a member of.

As I was sitting there hearing him lay out his father's life and his tell us his father's story, I was completely amazed. I was amazed that this man would risk such high stakes and leverage his position, his power and influence and even his reputation for the sake of someone who at that time

would otherwise never have been afforded that opportunity.

I was so impressed that his father could take such a risk in such a racially charged environment. I was impressed that his father had the courage to risk his reputation and even potentially risk his life to do something truly meaningful, something truly great, putting all of it aside to serve someone else who otherwise may never have had the opportunity.

[24 : 51] even as great as that act was though, Jesus' act was even greater. It says in the first few verses that when Jesus knew that the father had given all things into his hands, in verse number four, it says, he rose from supper and he laid aside his outer garments and taking a towel, he wrapped it around him and he knelt and began to wash their feet.

This wasn't the first time that Jesus laid aside his garments. I don't know if you know but in Philippians chapter two it tells us how Jesus, he emptied himself. Really, it's the picture of he took off his heavenly garments and he came down to earth and he put on human flesh these garments in order to serve us and he would die.

The scripture says that he became obedient even till death on a cross. It wasn't the first time Jesus laid aside his garments. It wasn't the first time that he gave up and laid aside everything in order to serve us and we see it best on the cross when he dies for us and he sends his blood but I love that the passage in Philippians two says that once he does all of that it is then that God gives him the highest name.

He exalts him and gives him the name that is above every name and that at the name of Jesus one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. See if we'll leverage what we have and give it to God and take risks to serve somebody else and look for ways to be great Jesus what we see in him we are sure will happen for us that if we'll lay it all down that God will exalt us God will reward us in the world to come when Jesus comes back we are going to be rewarded for it. Are you going to look for moments to be great? Are you going to allow the example that Jesus shows us to help you to do likewise?

[26 : 53] You will be really blessed if you do them if you wouldn't just know what he does but if you would actually do what he did maybe this week you can consider how you can serve your neighbor be inconvenienced not just for your church neighbor but your real neighbor maybe it's your co-worker that you can serve for again maybe it's serving the children maybe it's serving somebody who has four sons like my wife and I and giving us a break during the week you have more in your hands than you realize you can do something great by laying aside and being really willing to risk it all for the sake of somebody whose life you can change just because of what you lay aside I thank you Jesus for this time that we had in your word I pray that you would seal it for your glory we thank you for what you did for us so grateful it's in your wonderful matchless name that we pray amen thank you for that