

To Become Great

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Date: 19 July 2026

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[0:00] Have your Bibles open, friends. That will be a help as we look at this passage together. And let me just pray before we go any further. Lord Jesus, we need to hear your voice speaking! We want your message, your person, your power, your presence to be clear to us.

Please would you bless us in that way. May the things that are from you be received and remembered and put into practice. And those that are not from you, may they be forgotten. We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be great? Have you ever thought about that? I'd be surprised if there's someone here who like growing up has never thought, oh, I'd like to be great. I'd like to be loved. I mean, who doesn't love to be loved? Right? Just a quick experiment here to see how on trend we are at Bethel. Put your hand up if you know what that is. Okay, we're sort of hovering around the one-third mark. I'm going to say that if you don't know what that is, then well done. You're probably a happier, healthier human being than the rest of us. That is in fact a selfie stick. If you don't know what that is, I'm not going to spend any time explaining it to you. Just go and look it up somewhere or something. Do you know, a hundred years ago, most photographs captured things like family and community and sort of landscapes that people enjoyed and spent time in and monuments or great buildings that have been built, things like that. And today there are billions of images taken each year. And guess what most of them are? Selfies. Selfies. And they get shared on social media, of course. There's no such thing as a selfie before the year 2000. Those of you who were around before that, probably nodding, thinking those were the days. No selfies. But by 2013, it was the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year.

Unbelievable. Now, guys, the point isn't that selfies are wrong. Okay?

That's not the point. But they tell us, don't they, that something has changed in the way that we think. We're thinking, how can I present myself? Rather than, what does it mean for me to be part of this? That has changed, hasn't it? It's gone from, this is about us, the people who built this for us, what we have together, serving one another, to, this is about me.

That's where it's moving, isn't it? And if you don't join in, many of us don't join in with the selfie trend, then actually, secretly, you do feel a bit left behind when you see other people posting selfies, you know, and they look great and they get, you know, however many likes it is and comments about how great they look and you're like, I'd like a bit of that.

[3:26] What's the right way to think about greatness? Is it a selfie with three million likes? Is it having a monument built to you? Is it just that, you know, you're known as an all-round good person? What about when we meet Jesus?

Greatness. What's greatness then? What should we aim for? Perfect spiritual balance, maybe? You know, that you sort of radiate grace and when you walk through the room, you shower people with a trail of blessings in your wake. Is that greatness? If you don't know, you're not alone. Because the twelve, twelve disciples, they didn't know either. They thought they did in this passage. What happens in this passage is Jesus gently points us and them towards the cross, which is where he's on his way to, here. And he says to become great, you need to become a suffering servant. To become great, you need to become a suffering servant, because that's what I became for you. That's how you can follow me. Let's look at this passage together.

First of all, the good news defines greatness, verses 17 to 19. Let's read those together, shall we? Now, Jesus was going up to Jerusalem and on the way he took the twelve aside and he said to them, we are going up to Jerusalem. Think about Jesus for a moment. By almost any measure that matters, Jesus is the greatest person who has ever lived. Greatest number of followers or people that belong to him? Jesus, isn't it? Greatest influence on world history? Jesus. The person who most shapes the way that we think in our country today? Jesus.

What was his mission? Why did he come? We're going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. And on the third day, he will be raised to life. That's Jesus' mission. That's why he came. That is the heart of his message. That is the key to his greatness. Jesus came to die and to rise.

[6:05] So here's a fact. Every great person loses their greatness to death, don't they? They die.

It's over. They're just like everybody else. But death loses to Jesus. That's real greatness, isn't it? There is nothing else like this in the world that our maker loves us so much that he would reach out to those who have rejected him and sacrifice himself for them.

So that justice can be satisfied. Sin paid for. People transformed. The world renewed. And that death loses its grip, not just on Jesus, but on everyone who trusts in Jesus. That's what Christians call the good news, isn't it? That's the gospel. And it's in the gospel that Jesus showed that he is the highest, that he became the greatest. It's in the gospel that he made himself the lowest, like we were seeing earlier, for us. The gospel, the good news, defines greatness. Full stop. And Jesus here, if you're paying attention, you will have noticed, Jesus here shares it for the third time. For the third time. And we're supposed to be thinking, will the twelve finally get it? Will they understand it? It's the third time that Jesus has told them. They'll get it, won't they? Will they get what it means for following him? So thinking about discipleship together, aren't we, in this series in Matthew? We know what we want the disciples to say. We want them to say, Jesus, that's amazing. I think I finally understood it. Can you tell me more?

Can you help me live that way? But naturally speaking, we just don't see this as greatness, do we? It just feels wrong, upside down. Unless Jesus teaches us about it. This idea that losing your life means saving it, just is crazy. The last will be first. And that, you know, very human understanding is what we see in the disciples' response. And in that response, we see that greatness is not what we think. Verses 20 to 24. Let's just pick it up at verse 20.

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and kneeling down asked a favor of him. What is it you want? He asked. And she said, grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. Do you believe this? Another part of the gospel calls these guys the sons of thunder. James and John. So here we go. The sons of thunder bring their mum to do their asking for them. Go on, mum. You ask him. You ask him for us. I mean, that's what all really great people do, isn't it? They bring their mum. And what do they say via mum? [9:25] Well, they say something like this. We want to be close to you, Jesus. On your left and on your right. That's good, right? They know Jesus is great and they want to be close to him. Well, let's not get it wrong. There's definitely faith there, isn't there? They've clocked that Jesus is the one to be with.

But I think we probably feel, I think they probably felt that there's something a little off with this request of theirs. A little bit like when you run down to the pool to bag the best sunbed and slam your towel down it, don't you? Yeah, we all kind of do that, but we know it's not really how it should be.

They've not understood what it means to follow Jesus, to be a disciple. They want to be comfortable.

They want to be respected. They want to be served. Maybe they want to be seen to be great at the heart of it. And they just haven't understood what kind of King Jesus is and what his kingdom is about.

They've approached him, haven't they, like every other human ruler? The tradition, when you get to the top, you hand out your best places to your mates.

[10:44] That's kind of what they're thinking. It'd be interesting to see what Andy Burnham does shortly, won't it? They're thinking, great, I get, look, I get a selfie with Jesus on his amazing golden throne.

Look who I'm with, guys. That's their mentality. Jesus has just explained what's going on, what his mission is.

Sort of, I'd have my head in my hands at this point with the disciples. But Jesus doesn't rant or shout, doesn't send them out of his service. Instead, he takes these men, who he knows he's going to turn into pillars in his new world.

And he deals really gently with them. And do you know what he says to them? He says, greatness looks like, not that, greatness looks like a cup. Let's look at verse 22 together.

You don't know what you're asking, Jesus said. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? He says, don't understand. If you want to be close to Jesus, which is a good thing.

[11:53] I mean, who wouldn't want to be close to Jesus? It's going to mean being like him, yes, by doing what he did. Drinking the cup he drinks.

What cup? Arsha's going to read for us from Jeremiah 25 to help us understand what cup. Do you want to come up? Yeah, come on.

So it's Jeremiah 25, 15, and it's 786 in the Church Bibles.

The cup of God's wrath. This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me. Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath, and make all of the nations to whom I send you drink it.

Thank you. The cup that Jesus is talking about is the cup of God's wrath, which is deep enough and big enough for all of the nations to drink out of.

[12:55] That's the cup. The cup of suffering. Becoming great is going to mean suffering. And Jesus says to the disciples, the end of verse 22, can you drink the cup that I'm going to drink?

And the disciples say, sure, Jesus. We got this. We are so good at drinking out of cups. We can absolutely do that.

And we can't really throw stones, can we? At least I can't. Because I tell you what, I'm a lot better at drinking out the old Starbucks cup than I am drinking out this one.

Verse 23. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.

These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. Jesus is saying he's here, greatness is not being rewarded. It's not receiving recognition.

[14:05] It's not getting the credit you deserve. It's not being ambitious for the kingdom or achieving your potential or any of those things. That's not greatness.

Greatness is walking the path that God has laid out for you in Jesus' footsteps. And taking the place that God has prepared for you, like Jesus did.

And sometimes that path is hard, unexpected, and frankly, not what we want. And the outcomes, where we end up, the places of honour, that's God's business.

We don't worry about that. We leave that to him. Verse 24. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

You see, they don't really get it either. They're just upset that the sons of thunder, the thunder boys, got in there first with their request. And look at where that greatness leads, the one that they're after.

[15:09] Division, anger, jealousy. What we have here is a picture of a group of disciples who are disagreeing with each other, jostling for position.

They're a mix, aren't they? They're a mix of faith and ignorance. And that's after three years with Jesus. Jesus. It's really good that this is in the Bible, isn't it?

Because if there were picture-perfect disciples everywhere you looked, we'd all just despair and go home, wouldn't we? It's good this is here. Now I know these guys are as mixed up as me.

Jesus will die for these mixed up ones. On the other hand, one of the commentators says about the disciples, their insight into their own hearts is very small.

Ouch. But Jesus gives them insight into their own hearts by his words. how great is my insight into my own heart? It's an opportunity to pray briefly, to set aside our ideas of greatness and just to ask Jesus to give us insight into our own hearts.

[16:31] I encourage you to just take a moment to do that now before we carry on.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Jesus says, true greatness, to become great, is not like the greatness out there. For my disciples, for people who follow me, to become great is to become a servant.

Sounds like I might have to be on call if I'm a servant. It doesn't sound like it fits neatly around my agenda, being a servant.

[18:15] It sounds like it will definitely impact my hobby time and probably my bank balance. And then Jesus deepens it, verse 27.

And whoever wants to be first must be your slave. Two different words in the Greek. Not just a servant, a slave. That sounds like I might have to do some actually unpleasant things.

You know, like a bit icky and embarrassing. And you have to imagine them gasping at this point. Because for them, the idea of a slave, very common in the Roman Empire, had very little going for them.

The idea of someone like that becoming the greatest, impossible. For us, it's kind of the other way around, isn't it? All about greatness. The idea that the greatest one should become the slave of others.

That just seems unrealistic and naive. And that's why Jesus gives us the key to this passage. Why he explains what he said at the start.

[19:28] At the very end, verse 28. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. And to give his life as a ransom for many.

Can you see that Jesus is the suffering servant that we read about in Isaiah 53? It's Jesus that's being spoken about. His suffering achieves our freedom.

And so actually the first thing that we need to know about being great, about following Jesus at all, is to recognise that we have been ransomed. By the Lord Jesus. You were totally helpless and Jesus freed you.

The one dying for the many. It's a little aside. Let's take that thought for a moment. How can Jesus give his life as one man for the many?

Surely one life is worth one life. Well, if you go back to Isaiah 53, you'll find the beginnings of the answer to this question. Of course, that's true.

[20:39] That is true if Jesus is only a man. But if Jesus is also God, then his life is infinitely valuable, isn't it?

And then he can give his life for the many. Can you see why Jesus must be God and must be infinite in order for us to be saved?

We need to recognise that we've been ransomed. But secondly, look, Christian serving, following Jesus' discipleship, is not just any old kind of serving, is it?

Verse 28, Just as the Son of Man did not come to serve, to be served, but to serve. Serving like Jesus served.

Being a servant like Jesus was a servant. That's what Jesus is saying. That's greatness. Isn't it? In other words, through suffering and sacrifice.

[21:54] Think about the shape stuff that we've been doing for a moment as church. That's helpful, isn't it? It's helpful. And it's biblical. We thought about that together. It traces the outline, doesn't it?

Of how we might serve. And it aims at recognising who we are, how we're joined together. Aims at joy and at unity. But actually, friends, that shape stuff is not the heart of Christian service, of how we love and serve one another.

The heart of how we serve is just as Jesus served. Dying to himself. Rising for our hope. Suffering for our sins.

I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't come to earth thinking, let me think about my shape. I'm pretty sure that I'm the perfect shape for dying. But that was his greatest service, wasn't it?

That was his greatest gift to us. So we don't just serve by picking the things we like or will make us happy or we think we're good at, although those are all good things. True greatness.

[23:05] Following Jesus truly involves suffering as well as joy. That's how Jesus served. The only way you can serve like this is to know that you have been saved through his sacrificial service.

Isn't it? Spiritually impossible otherwise. You can only truly give of yourself sacrificially if you know yourself to have been saved for eternity.

In other words, to live this way, to become great, we need Jesus to save us and to dwell in us.

There's suffering in every life, isn't there? We all have pain one way or another. And here's the thing, you can't know someone, you can't serve them well unless you enter into their suffering. Jesus came down, entered into our suffering and served us and saved us from that place, didn't he?

[24:24] And because of that, we call him great. If we want to follow Jesus, if we want to be great, then we must enter into each other's suffering and serve each other from there.

It's brought home to me this week, I was talking with someone and I realised I had not entered into their suffering properly. And therefore my help was not helpful. Where are you with this in your serving, friend?

Are you willing to pursue understanding the suffering of Jesus, understanding the suffering of your brother or sister so that you can serve them well with a Jesus-like love?

that's the way to greatness. And there are lots of people, praise God, at our church who have learnt that over many years and who have seen God use that in the life of others.

So if you're not sure what it looks like, look around you, find them, watch them. anybody feel like giving up this week just in general?

[25 : 37] Maybe you do now after hearing this. I did. I felt like giving up several times in several different ways. I'm thinking, now you're asking me to serve by sacrificing and suffering, but I've got nothing left.

You're not alone. I was just going to come and read a second verse for us. Matthew 26, verse 39, and it's page 997.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will. Thanks.

This is how Jesus felt before he went to the cross, isn't it? I can't do it. I've got nothing left in the face of sacrifice and suffering.

He knows. So how can we live this way then? Well, I just want to share with you a story from one of my favourite Dutch ladies. Some of you already know who it is now. Corrie ten Boom.

[26 : 59] She was sharing with a lot of Christians in Africa who were facing a very difficult time.

This is what she said. I once said to my father, I was still a little girl, Daddy, I will never be strong enough to suffer for Jesus.

And my father said to me, When you go to travel with the train to Amsterdam, when do I give you the ticket? Three weeks before? And father said, and I said, No, Daddy, you give me the ticket the day that I go to travel.

And father said, That's what God does. Today, you do not need to have the strength to suffer for Jesus. But the moment that you will have the honour to suffer for him, he will give you all the strength.

And Corrie ten Boom said, And then I was confident when you have to suffer for Jesus, the Lord will give you the train ticket. And we can live that way, knowing that God has already issued and paid for the tickets when he gave Jesus the strength to drink the cup of the cross.

Jesus knew it. You can read all about it in the Bible. And now we know that way. We can live this way because God promises to give us what we need when we need it.

[28 : 23] Promise kept in Christ. So don't get this wrong. It's easy to walk away from this thinking, Jesus is a good example to me and I need to be kind to other people.

That's not the main message here. In fact, the main message isn't even Jesus wants me to be great, whatever that means. The main message here is Jesus saying, be mine.

I am the ransom for many and I will give you all that you need just as my father gave me all that I needed to save you utterly and completely.

Greatness is suffering as a servant and Jesus, the servant king, has done all the suffering necessary to save us. Hallelujah. I'd love to invite you to take a moment to pray.

Some words on the screen there which you can use. Just a moment to pray as we reflect and then we'll finish. Amen. .

[30 : 12] 17 says, Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

If indeed we share in his sufferings, in order that we may also share in his glory. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that your sufferings have achieved everything that is necessary for us to be safe with you forever.

Thank you for the forgiveness and freedom you brought at the cross. Lord Jesus, we want to follow you because we know that that's where greatness lies.

We understand that this will mean sacrifice and suffering as we serve. Help us. Give us what we need to enter into each other's suffering as we follow in your footsteps.

Help us in that way to share in your suffering that we may share in your glory. We ask those things in Jesus' name. Amen.