

Measuring True Greatness

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[0 : 00] I'm going to start by telling you about something that happened to me a long, long time ago. I was about 13 or 14, I think, at the time. But I remember at the time that I wanted to be great.

I wanted to be a person of importance, someone that would achieve great things. And so I set my sights on being a Prime Minister of Singapore, not Australia, where I was born.

And that was a country where appointments were made on merit. At least that's what I think they did. Now on top of that, so that's still 13 and 14, that was the first thing I wanted.

But on top of that, I also decided that I was going to make it to the Olympics and to win a gold medal in swimming. Now I remember this was the days before Joseph's schooling. You might remember him from the last Olympics.

He's the first Singaporean to win a gold medal. He got a million dollars for that. The million dollars wasn't being offered at the time. Singapore was a rather poorer country at the time. But that was okay because I wasn't doing it for the money.

[1 : 06] I was going to do it because I wanted to be great. And if that wasn't enough to be a Prime Minister and be at the Olympics, I also decided that I wanted to be the first person to prove Fermat's last theorem.

Now here's where I know some of your eyes are probably glazing over. Is Daniel Broadbridge here by the way? No, he's not. He would understand. A few of you nerdy ones might. Maybe all of you do.

I don't know. But I just want to impress on you how big this challenge was. Because Fermat's last theorem was an equation that remained unproven for some 350 years.

Fermat, anyone know who Fermat is? No? No? No? No? No? Really? A few people. Oh, good.

Some of the nerdy ones were there. Fermat was a 17th century mathematician. And he had written down in one of the margins of his books the fact that he knew the proof to this equation.

But he then said, oh, but there's not enough space in the margin, so I can't tell you what it is. And so the equation remained unproven for 350 years. Even the best mathematicians couldn't prove it.

[2 : 19] Now, in case anyone is interested in this theorem, I've got it up on the slide. Okay? It's not that hard to understand. It states that no three integers, A, B, and C, satisfies the above equation for any integer value greater than 2, n greater than 2.

Now, you can see if n is 1, there's lots of solutions, right? A plus B equals C. If n is 2, a squared plus b squared equals c squared. I think primary school you learned that there's lots of equations. 3 squared plus 4 squared equals 5 squared. Now, unfortunately for me, this theorem was actually proven in 1994, just when I was close to a solution myself.

Okay, that was a lie. But I was rather disappointed when I found out. As for my other goals, well, you can search my name on Wikipedia, but you wouldn't find any entry with my name against it.

Actually, can you believe it? I mean, of all the Mark Chews in the world, none of them actually warrant even a single line entry in Wikipedia. That's how great Mark Chews are.

[3 : 33] But then I got onto Google, and guess what? I discovered that I was actually a famous photographer. I've even got my own website. If you click www.markchew.com.au on the next page.

Have you got that? There you go. That's my webpage. And if you click on the About page, you see how great a photographer I am. I've moved to Australia from London in 1985.

And then I have many distinguished clients, including Australia's leading universities, airlines, and banks. Now, that webpage, they did get one thing wrong, though.

And that's the photo. It's the wrong guy. I need them to actually use this other photo instead. Okay. I think we can move on from that one. Thank you. Okay. Oh, you can all see. It's a bit of a laugh.

But I have failed spectacularly, haven't I, at being great.

[4 : 36] But as I read this passage tonight, I actually took great comfort because I discovered that I'm not alone in wanting to be great. Because, as we've heard, the disciples as well wanted to be great, didn't they?

And, in fact, in verse 46, they even started an argument over it. Now, it's not quite clear how much time has passed between verse 45 and 46. And if you look at the other corresponding accounts in Matthew and Mark, you'll see that this takes place in Capernaum, which you've looked on the map, which I've got on the screen again, is a little to the west of Bethsaida, which is where, if you remember a few weeks ago, the feeding of the 5,000 took place.

So, I think Luke has intentionally put this incident here because he wants to show us the irony of what's happening here.

For the disciples, just as they were arguing over who was the greatest, have just, as it were, shown their ignorance and fear, haven't they?

If not immediately before, then certainly in the verse before, at least in the distant, very recent past. It's like two students getting their math test back.

[5 : 49] One gets 30%. The other gets 32%. Both are fails, in case you're wondering. And they're arguing about who the better math student is.

What's more, the argument is taking place just when Jesus has also revealed to them his coming betrayal, his death on the cross, the most shameful of spectacles in the Roman world.

It's the very opposite of success and greatness. And here they are, talking about who's the greatest. Now, again, if we look at Matthew, we get the added detail that what they were arguing over wasn't just who was the greatest, but they were arguing who was the greatest in the kingdom.

In other words, they were arguing about what God thinks of them and who Jesus considers the greatest. No doubt, some of them may have tally up the number of demons they've cast out, the number of people they've healed, for example, and thought, ah, I'm ahead.

I must be the greatest. Or Judas, for example, may have thought that he was the greatest because he's been appointed to be the treasurer. And then maybe even James and John would have been whispering to each other and saying, hey, I think we're the greatest because God chose us, together with Peter, as the only ones to witness this transfiguration.

[7 : 17] Now, it's all getting a bit silly in the end, isn't it? Except, if we think about it, we sometimes play these games as well, don't we? We might not talk about who's the greatest, but we do compare ourselves, don't we?

And as Christians, we sometimes start thinking certain types of good deeds are better than others. So for some of us, we would see our personal purity and morality, not sleeping around, you know, not getting drunk all the time, and we would say, yeah, that's the thing that makes us better than others.

That's the thing that gets us bonus points in the kingdom. For others, it's the amount of volunteering that we do, or the amount of money we give to organizations like TIER or Good Causes.

And still others might think, oh, it's the number of people that I've brought to Christ. After all, if anything, this is the one that surely counts, right? Because real people are being saved from hell.

Now, as a pastor, there are certain arguments I choose not to get involved in, like which version of Amazing Grace is the better one to sing, you know, the traditional one, or the Chris Tomlin version.

[8 : 31] I don't get involved because I just don't think it's important enough. But then there are other things that I overhear in discussion, and even though people don't want me to, I insist on weighing in.

Why? Because what they're arguing over matters. And so it is here with Jesus. What they were arguing over matters. Not so much because it matters who's the greatest.

No, it matters because how they think about greatness matters. And so, even though they hadn't come to Jesus to ask for his advice, verse 47, Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a child, a little child, and had him stand beside him.

And then with the child beside him, Jesus explains to them what the true measure of greatness is in the kingdom. Jesus will also use another question from John later to draw out the same point about greatness.

But first, let's look at verse 48, where true greatness is measured by how we treat those who are least among us. In verse 48, Jesus says of the child, whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

[9 : 53] For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest. Now, if you ask Jesus' disciples, I'm sure that they would have bent over backwards to serve him, to honor him.

He was their great teacher. Whatever he said, they would have gladly done. But as for the child that was beside him, well, here was someone in those days who was actually treated as the least in society.

Children had no power or independence in those days. But what Jesus was effectively saying is that the way they treated this child is equivalent to the way they would treat Jesus, and further, the way they treat God.

For to Jesus, this child, despite his weakness and dependence, was someone worthy of welcome and honor.

In God's kingdom, these things aren't measured by how powerful someone was, or how much they had achieved. Instead, God himself is the one that gives the child value and honor.

[11 : 02] Further, Jesus calls them to welcome the child, you see, in his name. Meaning that this welcome was something that Jesus would have done himself. And it was actually a welcome into his kingdom.

Now, we know all this. We see this all the time. That the natural thing we do in life is to honor those we think are more important to us.

If you are the most important person in the room, then everyone else defers to you. They all do what you want, whether they like it or not. Of course, we all do this.

People do this largely for selfish reasons, don't they? We defer to important people because we hope to gain an advantage from it. Perhaps to rise in importance as we do, or else to have that person show us favor.

And by contrast, no one pays much attention to the lowly person, right? Because there's nothing to be gained by it. You see, people in offices, the big, you know, people always saying hi to the big boss.

[12 : 13] But if the person from the mailroom comes through or the person who's the cleaner, sometimes they're ignored. Often they're ignored. Also, people gravitate towards those with qualities or things that they admire.

So if we hang around rich people, it's because we think wealth is a measure of someone's worth. Or if we hang around people that can really talk, have the gift of the gab, that's because we think that's a measure of greatness.

And so, what really happens is that the way we treat others more often reveals more about us than about the person that we're treating. What we value, what we think is important, is shown, is demonstrated by how we actually treat people.

Now, that's the way the world does it, of course. But Jesus, as we see here, turns everything upside down in God's kingdom. For he says that the greatest person is the one who is least among you, the one who puts themselves last, the one who serves everyone else, even the weak and the poor. If you are the greatest, then you put yourself last. That's very different, isn't it, to the way the world thinks. Mark, in his gospel, in verse 35 of chapter 9, says it explicitly, or Jesus says it more explicitly there.

[13 : 39] He says it like this, Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all. Now, in the Bible, there are many examples, but one person that managed to do this was Moses.

We heard that in our first reading tonight, that God actually gave Moses an opportunity to be first, didn't he, in the eyes of the world. Israel had sinned by worshipping the golden calf, and God had said, Look, I'm going to destroy Israel, and I'm going to make you, Moses, into a great nation. I'm going to now put you first. Imagine if you got an offer like that. It's really tantalizing, isn't it? And it's coming from God. It's not coming from anyone else. to take the place of Abraham, the foremost patriarch, and to have all the blessings that was promised to him now transferred to you.

But as we heard tonight in that reading, Moses would have nothing of it, would he? Because he wasn't thinking of himself. Instead, he was thinking of God, first of all, how the honor of his name would suffer if he took back his promises.

What would the nation say about him? But secondly, Moses was also concerned for the other people, for the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one that God had brought out of Egypt.

[14:59] And that's why we have, in Numbers chapter 12, this verse that says that Moses was the most humble man, the most humble upon the earth.

It was, I think, because of this incident, and there were one or two other incidents as well, that marked him out as being a humble man. But of course, even Moses was surpassed by Jesus. Jesus was the Son of God, fully divine, and yet he came to earth and humbled himself by dying on the cross. He served, not just his disciples, but all humanity.

He didn't simply die for the noble people, or the rich people, or the powerful people, but he died for the poor and the helpless too, those whom society wouldn't have given any time for.

And you know, if you ask anyone, even people who are not Christians, they would say that Jesus was a great man, wouldn't they? They would read what he's done in the gospel, and they would say that he's a great man.

[16:03] Because all of us readily see greatness, don't we, when we see people sacrifice themselves, put others ahead of their own interests. And yet, even though we see this as, wow, this is greatness, yet when it comes to our own lives, it's so much harder to do ourselves, isn't it?

So much harder to live for others and not for self, to put ourselves last. Well, that's the first insight we get into greatness, but then we come to the second insight, which is in verse 49 and 50.

And this happens in the context of John raising an objection with Jesus. Again, it's not clear if this occurs straight after verse 48, but Luke has put this immediately after because he sees this as very much part of the discussion about greatness.

So if you look with me at verse 49, John says to Jesus, Master, we saw someone drive out demons in your name and we try to stop him because he's not one of us.

Now, I guess the first thing we need to think about is what is John's motivation for saying this, for doing this? You know, there are a few options. Was he perhaps afraid for Jesus' reputation?

[17:21] Perhaps, you know, if this guy didn't manage to drive out the demon, that Jesus' reputation would be damaged because he used his name? Perhaps. But then, they've just, themselves, the disciples have just failed, haven't they, to drive out that spirit from the epileptic boy.

So maybe not. Secondly, perhaps it was the fact that this person isn't working under the instruction of Jesus. You know, we can't have people going rogue, can we, on Jesus?

That's not good. People need to be working under Jesus' orders. That's quite possible. Or maybe, which is the third option, which I think is the right, the one that I favor, is because John is afraid that this person might actually succeed.

And if he does, then what's going to happen to John and the other 12? What's going to happen to their status? Because everyone's going to then start doing it. And things are going to get out of control, aren't they?

It's just like Uber, isn't it? You know, nowadays, everyone can go around giving rides and charging for it, making a living. And look what's happened to the poor taxi driver and his license.

[18:38] And maybe John was thinking that was going to happen to the 12, their status. You know, very soon, no one's even going to bother to follow Jesus or stick with him. Their position in the kingdom, the 12, is going to be threatened.

And so I think it seems that John's concern is again one of greatness. Except now, he sees the threat not so much from the people that are already in Jesus' inner circle, but from people outside the circle.

But Jesus' answer to him was this, Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you. Now again, it's interesting how when you compare the three accounts, you see various differences. But here again, Luke, unlike Mark, he actually doesn't say whoever is not against us is for us. That's what Mark says. Instead, he uses the word you. And I think he does that so as to hone in on the disciples' mission.

As if to emphasize to them that Jesus' mission is actually your mission as well. And so if actually someone succeeds in driving out demons, then they're actually contributing to your success in your mission.

[19:52] And so, you as disciples ought to rejoice in it. It's as though you yourself have done the deed. And after all, if they truly care for God's purposes to be done, then really, why worry about who's actually doing it?

As long as the mission or the task is being fulfilled, it doesn't matter, does it? Who actually does it? But if their fear is somehow that their status is diminished by it, then again, I think that thinking is

wrong, isn't it?

Because God's kingdom actually doesn't work like this. There's no sense in which if someone's status gains in the kingdom, then that means somebody else has to lose out. That's the way the competitive world thinks.

But that's not the way the kingdom works, is it? So why is there a need to be threatened by someone else's success? There's no need to compete or compare in God's kingdom because God places value on us, each of us, one at a time and not relative to each other.

It's like the question that children always ask their parents. Some of them do. You know, the question, who do you love more? My brother or sister or I? And if you're a good parent, if you're a smart parent, you know what the answer is, isn't it?

[21 : 18] You will say that you love all your children equally and that just to say, oh, dear child, I love you so much doesn't mean that the other child isn't loved as much.

We love everyone equally and the love for one child isn't diminished by the love for another. And so it is in God's kingdom. There is no ranking for greatness.

There is no first place, second place, third place so that if someone is the greatest, then, you know, everyone else has to be second. Rather, God values and sees worth in everyone irrespective of how each one is in the kingdom.

All can be great if they learn how to serve one another. So it's not hard to see, isn't it, that the underlying issue under both cases is actually pride, selfish pride.

It's being focused on our status in the kingdom when what the disciples needed to do in the first was to concentrate on serving the needs of others and in the second to focus on serving God's purpose or rejoicing when we see that purpose achieved.

[22 : 37] Well, that's the passage in a nutshell. It's not a very long passage, but I want you to spend some time working out how we can relate that to us today as Christians.

And if you look at the outline, what I'm going to try and do is to try and summarize it under three headings, three pointers, as it were, about greatness. First, I want to say that it's actually okay to desire greatness.

If you notice Jesus' reply, he actually doesn't reject their quest for greatness, does he? But what he does is he redirects it towards the true definition of greatness.

And our desire for greatness is because actually we are created for a purpose, aren't we? That's how God has created us. Maybe greatness is not the right word, but we all desire to make a difference in life, to have our lives count for something, to be significant in some way.

And so it's okay to want to desire that, to be significant. Jesus isn't saying by these verses that to be the least among all, then what we settle for is mediocrity.

[23 : 48] You know, that we have no desire to do well or to put in our best effort. We have no desire for influence or authority. After all, the disciples go on, don't they, to be apostles in the church and Peter, the rock on which Christ builds his church.

These are things of honor. These are positions of influence, aren't they? And many of you are or will become leaders as well, both in church and in society.

I mean, just being parents is a position of influence, isn't it, in the family? But as we become people with influence, become leaders, the important thing isn't so much desiring greatness, but actually choosing the right definition of it.

Choosing to live by Jesus' definition of greatness. greatness. And when we do that, then what we don't do is subscribe to the world's definition.

Because the world's definition says that high achievers are those that are greater. If you score higher marks at school, then you're greater than the one who doesn't have as good marks at school.

[24 : 59] If you get a job promotion, then you're greater than someone who doesn't have a job promotion. And the world says that you can look to your wealth, your achievements, and your salary, or whatever other things, your cars, your houses, as signs of your worth.

But that's not Jesus' definition of greatness. Instead, if we follow Jesus, then we choose to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, so that we can use our influence, not for our own gain, but to serve others, especially those in society that are considered to be unimportant.

And this is true too, particularly when it comes to the church. So for instance, when Michelle or Jeff calls for more volunteers to serve in Sunday school, how many of us will put our hands up for that?

Or will we think, oh no, you know, that's not for me. God has called me to train leaders. God has called me to train people with potential. Now, I'm not trying to have a go at anyone, because ultimately, these things are only things that you yourself will know, right? It's between you and God, and it's what is in your heart, your true motives, that God will know. So I'm not trying to have a go at anyone. And yet, I have to say that when I look at my own life, I can see how easily it is for me to deceive myself, and use all sorts of reasons to hide the real motive for what I do, which is pride and selfish desires.

[26 : 34] So much so that, you know, we can actually even be selfish, can't we, when we're serving others. So we can even volunteer to do kids ministry, and all the while be thinking, wow, I'm selfless, aren't I?

I'm looking after these little ones. You know, I hope others are noticing. I hope God thinks I'm great. it's not hard to think like that, is it?

But again, that's just pride, isn't it? And so I've come to my final point, and that is, while it's okay to seek greatness, let's leave God to measure our greatness.

That is, let's not worry about whether what we're doing is great or not, but let's just focus on what we're supposed to do and get on with doing it. Because a truly great person is not self-focused. They don't have time to worry about how great they are. And that was how Jesus was. He focused not on his own glory, right? He focused on the glory of his father.

[27 : 37] And in turn, it was the father who glorified him. And friends, even as I say this, I know how hard it is to do, how hard it is actually, impossible it is to be truly selfless.

Christ. And I think it's only when we realize that our identity is rooted in Christ, that's when we are truly free, I think, from this selfish obsession.

Because then we realize that we're just like this little child beside Jesus. We are totally dependent on God for our worth. It's not what we do. It's not what we achieve.

We bring nothing to the kingdom of God. But it's because God loves us in Christ that we're people of value and worth. And once we know that, then really nothing can take that away from us, right? We have nothing to prove, except to simply trust in his son Jesus. And so there's no longer any need to be better than others. But we would gladly put others first, because we know that greatness is found in not what we do, but what God has done for us in Christ.

[28 : 54] And so as Christians, I want to encourage us, even as we head into Easter and Good Friday, that we keep coming back to this great truth. The truth that we are great in God's eyes because of what Jesus has done for us, not by what we need to do to prove ourselves with others or to prove ourselves with God.

And when we keep coming back to this truth, then we become truly free from the obsession with greatness. And that will enable us then to serve others, to put others before us, and to do it without any ulterior motive.

Let's pray. Father, guard us from the sin of pride and self-giving. Instead, give us a trust in Jesus and a dependence on Him so that our identity is found only in Him and not in our achievements. turn our hearts to be like Him so that we serve others and we serve you wholeheartedly, seeking to please you alone.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.