

True Greatness

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[0:00] The Old Testament reading for today comes from Isaiah 52, verse 13 to 53, verse 12. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[1:33] He was opposed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away, yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people he was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.

By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear the iniquities. Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.

[2:41] For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors. The New Testament reading comes from Mark 9, verses 30-37.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.

He said to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise. But they did not understand what he meant, and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, What were you arguing about on the road? But they kept quiet, because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all. He took a little child, whom he placed among them.

[3:53] Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me.

This is the word of the Lord. Hello, everyone.

If you can have your Bibles open to page 1012, that's chapter 9 of Mark that we're going to continue in. But I'm going to begin with the film, The Greatest Showman.

And I know the mention, the very mention of Hugh Jackman, probably sets a few hearts fluttering among us. Now, for the very few of you, some of the guys were actually smiling.

For the very few guys, I mean, for the very few people that have actually not watched the show, The Greatest Showman is a film where Jackman plays P.T. Barnum, right?

[4:57] This circus showman, and he's recruiting these sort of misfits for his circus. People who face social prejudice and are yearning for acceptance.

Now, here's a confession from me. I actually have not watched a movie. You know, shock horror. But nobody can avoid the songs because they're just on the airwaves all the time.

Not all the time, but when it was being filmed all the time. So, you know these, Never Enough, A Million Dreams, And This Is Me, Right?

Among many others. And, you know, going by the song titles and lyrics is actually not hard to guess, even if you haven't watched the show, what it's all about. So, take, for example, the song This Is Me.

Lyrics on the screen. You want to sing along? You can. I'm not. But it says, I'm not a stranger in the dark. Hide away, they say. Because we don't want your broken parts.

[6:04] I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars. Run away, they say. No one will love you as you are. But I wouldn't let them break me down to dust.

I know there's a place for us, for we are glorious. I'm brave. I'm bruised. I am who I'm meant to be. This is me. Look out, cause here I come.

And I'm marching on the beat eyedrum. I'm not scared to be seen. I make no apologies. This is me. I mean, I get pretty moved by those words as well, don't you?

Because they tap into our deepest longings and fears. Our desire to belong, to be seen as worthy or having worth by others. To be significant.

To be great, even. And the basic message of the song is that if you want to be great, you need to fight for it. Be strong. Be assertive. Let the world know who you are.

[7:06] This is the world the world tells us all the time, isn't it? Not just the movie, but everywhere. I'm sure you've heard it at schools, in your school, in uni, on the news, and if you went to a self-help section in a bookstore, you'll find it all there.

It's the zeitgeist, isn't it? The air that we breathe is full of it. And when this is the accepted wisdom, then everyone lives by it to some degree or another.

But brothers and sisters, if you are a follower of Christ, then the Bible, God's truth, gives us a very different picture. And the lesson for today is just that.

In our passage where Jesus himself will teach us, not just with his words, but with his very own life, by his example. If true greatness is what you're looking for, then this passage has to be studied carefully.

And then we need to ask God to give us the strength to live by it. It's a short passage, gem-packed with gems, and there are four points in my outline today, not three, but all of them are Ps.

[8:21] The first, P, is in verse 30. They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were because he was teaching his disciples. Now we've seen before that Jesus makes no attempt, really, to milk the attention that he's receiving.

Every politician would do otherwise. Really, this was no better time to strike while the iron's hot, isn't it? He's just performed a wonderful wonderful and amazing miracle.

Surely, now's the time to get a few more followers, draw some attention to himself. But instead, Jesus is focused on teaching his disciples. So, he needs space and quiet to do that away from the crowds.

And the first thing he does is to predict his coming death again, second time. And so he says, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise.

But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. So before Jesus goes about teaching them about greatness, he gives them a picture of it from his own life, what he's about to do.

[9:32] He will model it for them by his death on the cross. He will enable them to find greatness because he first provides for it by his substitutionary sacrifice.

This picture of true greatness then is the opposite to what the world expects. It's found not in being the greatest showman but in being the greatest servant.

It's the story of a divine Son of Man, Jesus, being brought low at the hands of his creatures, killed, hung on a cross, but then very importantly, rising from the dead on the third day.

Now, the disciples had heard this before from Jesus but last time they didn't understand Jesus either and Peter was then so bold as to rebuke Jesus as to say, no way, only to be rebuked by Jesus in return.

So now, they're a bit sheepish, right? They just choose to keep quiet, too afraid to ask. Now, of course, the disciples could have understood this if they had realized that Jesus is none other than the suffering servant that Nat Rank read from the Old Testament today.

[10:48] Because right at the beginning in Isaiah 52, 13 we read, See, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. But also, just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.

And so, this is a prediction, isn't it, of just how cruelly Jesus will be treated. Physical disfigurement, social scorn.

In verse 3, we read that he was despised and rejected by men, so much so that people hid their faces from him. He will be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, oppressed and afflicted.

And yet, the whole passage begins with a promise of him being exalted, raised up. And of course, in light of the cross, the words raised up and lifted have a double meaning, isn't it?

He will be lifted up, literally, on the cross and then raised up from the dead. But it's also words that mean he will be glorified and exalted. In other words, Jesus' true greatness will be displayed as he hung on the cross, as the Father's glory is magnified by his obedience.

[12:13] This, then, is not the moment of Jesus' greatest humiliation, but rather, on the cross, that was his finest hour. And so, the picture of true greatness he embodies now will become, for us, the pattern of greatness as well.

But before we get there, let's come back to the disciples and take a look at their actions, because attention now shifts to them and what they have been doing on the road.

And what they have been arguing about is a preoccupation with greatness. Verse 33, they came to Capernaum when he was in the house, that's Jesus, he asked them, what were you arguing about on the road?

But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. And so, the contrast couldn't be greater. Jesus was about to die, right? And all they could be focused on was arguing about who was the greatest.

And we know from other parts of the Gospels that this is not the only instance of it. That actually, throughout their sort of time with Jesus, they had been arguing about greatness and who was greater.

[13:24] Now, what has triggered this particular instance? Well, if you remember last week, maybe some of them, the nine that were down at the bottom of the mountain, they were jealous maybe that they didn't get to go out with Jesus.

Or maybe it was the other way around. Peter, James, and John, they were getting a little big-headed. You know, they were thinking, oh, we've got the special secret with Jesus. We've got to go up. And Jesus told us to not tell anyone about his transfiguration.

So maybe they thought they were the special ones. But you know, before we start sort of at the disciples, we need to check ourselves as well, isn't it?

Because this is normal human behavior, is it not? I mean, we may not care to admit it, but we're constantly doing the same, right? If only in our heads. Maybe we don't talk about being the greatest, but we certainly compare, don't we?

We use that then as a measure of our greatness, whether we're better than someone, right? If you've started working, you're always comparing, isn't it? What did the other grads start to earn and then compare it to you?

[14:35] If you've just finished year 12, what was the ATAR all about except the biggest comparator, ranking all the students in Australia based on one number, right?

Now, I have to admit that I'm guilty as well. Some of you will know that I do ride my bike and I like to put my rides on Strava. As my daughter says, if it's not on Strava, it doesn't count.

And you know, from time to time, not very often, but from time to time, a message does pop up to tell me that I'm the local legend on a particular route. Now, if you didn't know that, that's when, you know, you are the number one user of that particular bike route over the last 90 days or whatever. And you don't have to say, when it comes up, it's silly, but, you know, I feel good about it. It gives me an ego boost, doesn't it? For, you know, maybe 24 hours before someone snatches it.

But that's the problem, isn't it? Because we all use these comparisons as proxy of our worth and our significance. We all do it. And like I said with the greatest showman, it's because we have this innate longing to be valued.

[15:53] And when we take away an objective measure like what God thinks about us, a true measure, then all we're left with really are these comparators, right? Comparisons based on status symbols to find worth in ourselves.

But the fact is they're hopelessly subjective, isn't it? Unsustainable, because you're only good, as good as your last win. Just take tennis, for example. We all thought that Roger was the goat, and then, you know, Nadal came along, and then Djokovic.

And then what happened with Djokovic just recently with Australia? He got peeved because he was asked by the reporters, how does he feel now having to chase Sina and Alcatraz, right?

And how did he respond? He said, what do you mean chase? I'm the one with 24 titles, and now you're saying that I'm not as good as them. It's hopeless, isn't it? And that's why Jesus points us to a better way, verse 35.

So he sits down, calling the twelve, that's a sort of teaching moment there, and then he says, anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all. Now notice here that Jesus is not denying them their search for greatness.

[17:07] He's not saying don't bother, don't worry about it. Rather, he corrects their view of true greatness, right? And tells them how to achieve it.

And he says true greatness that is being first comes from being the very last. It's an inversion of how the world thinks. The greatest person is not the one at the head of the line, or the one given the greatest honor, or the one that everyone is looking at, but actually the opposite.

Now here's the tricky thing. It's actually very hard to apply this, right? Because you're not great just by virtue of being at the back of the line, especially if that's your sole reason for being there, right?

To be great. Now there's a practice in some churches, the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church, where often in some big service there's always a procession of leaders, right? At the start of the service.

And based on this scriptural principle found here, the most senior leader of the church always goes last. It's meant to symbolize this fact that the first shall be last, right?

[18:25] But actually it sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it? Because when the procession happens, guess what? All of a sudden, who is everyone looking at?

Not the person at the start, but the person right at the end, right? And so it's sort of like, what's the meaning of all that? Now I'm not saying this because the archbishop or the bishop wants to do all this, like they're really sort of into being great.

I mean, that's just the tradition, and so they're just sort of doing what has been done. It says nothing of the character of that person, but it's insidious, isn't it? You're trying to be last because you want

to be first.

Instead, Jesus' point here is that true greatness comes when you don't care about it, when you're not concerned about your position relative to others, when you're more focused on caring for others and putting their needs first.

And that's why Jesus adds, they are to be the servant of all. Now, that's not easy to do either because being so focused on serving others that you don't have to worry about what others think of you doesn't come naturally to us, does it?

[19:34] Because often we even do good deeds, don't we? Sometimes we, oh, I hope that people notice what good I'm doing, right? We do good things to make a good impression.

And again, that defeats the purpose, doesn't it? Now, there's a book that I often give away. It's a pretty thin and very not expensive book. It's called The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness by Tim Keller.

And I love the title because that is exactly what our goal should be in life and as a Christian, to be self-forgetful. And not only does it bring freedom, as Tim says, but also we find greatness because we become like Jesus.

It's a paradox, isn't it? Because the less we concern ourselves with our own greatness, the more we find it. But the moment we start to focus and think about it, are we great? It's the moment that actually we start losing it.

I don't know whether you've ever tried to do this. When I was a younger person, I tried as a kid. But have you ever tried to look at the side of your eye with one mirror? you know?

[20:46] You can't, can't you? Because every time you turn your eye, you're not looking at the side of your eye anymore, you're looking at your eye. And I think that's a bit like what's going on here, isn't it? The more you try and focus on greatness, the more it escapes us, doesn't it?

And that's why the feel-good message of the greater showman doesn't work in the end. Because what it does is it encourages us to be self-focused rather than self-forgetful.

The more we try to make ourselves great and adored by others, the more it eludes us. But Jesus did exactly the opposite.

Instead of seeking his own greatness, he served others. He humbled himself. He went to the cross, like it says in Isaiah, like a lamb to the slaughter without opening his mouth to protest.

Not once did he say on earth, how dare they? Don't they know who I am? Which he had every right to do as the son of God, but he never said that.

[21:47] He cared nothing for his own reputation. And so as a result, the father exalts him, right? You go back to Isaiah 53, 11-12. We read that after he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.

By his knowledge, my righteous servant, God saying, will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. And therefore I, the Lord, will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressions.

You know, such was Jesus' humility that he not only put others first, he was willing to take the punishment for their offense, right? How hard is it?

Have you ever tried to take the blame for others? We're quick to defend ourselves, isn't it? Even at the slightest hint of false accusation, because that's our pride and our self-righteousness talking.

But Jesus served us to the point of becoming sin for us, even though he's pure righteousness. He hung on the cross for the sinners that put him there.

[22:58] Can you then see why this picture of the Son of Man hanging from the cross is the perfect picture of true greatness? We will do well to keep meditating on it day by day, week by week, all the rest of our lives.

Now, let me just say, just to put you out of your misery, that none of us will ever attend to Jesus' greatness, right? We are all sinners, we are full of pride, we are self-righteous, we need forgiveness and salvation.

There's no greatness in any of that. But amazingly, when we put our trust in Jesus, and we believe in him and follow him, then we're given the opportunity by his grace to reflect his greatness by being like him.

And so Jesus finally tells them in the last two verses, 36 and 37, he gives them a lesson on the practice of greatness. And he says, he took a little child whom he placed among them, take the child in his arms, he said to them, whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me. Now, let's be clear, firstly, that Jesus is not here choosing a child because they're cute and endearing. That's not the reason. Otherwise, we would all think it's easy, right?

[24:26] Because who doesn't love to play with cute children? Everyone gravitates to them. But if you've ever been a parent, you will know that the cute baby may be two or three hours a day, but then there's the other 20 plus hours where they're needing attention.

They're not doing as they are told. They're messing up the house. They're tugging at you while you're trying to do stuff. So Jesus' point here is not that the babies are cute and therefore we are to welcome them.

Rather, the characteristic of a child that Jesus had in mind is their total lack of status and influence. They're not important enough, particularly in Jesus' day, to be afforded any attention.

And that's why when we get later into chapter 10, the disciples were annoyed that the children were coming to Jesus and he was letting them. I mean, doesn't Jesus know that they're taking up his precious time and attention?

Doesn't he have something more important to do? But no, children are nobodies in the culture of their time, right? Which is why you don't bother welcoming them. There was nothing, if you did, that they could offer in return.

[25:42] And so the principle for our day today as well, to be servant of all, is to practice the welcome of not just children, but anyone, particularly those with no influence or status among our midst.

And Jesus says to do it in his name, that is, to welcome them and serve them as one of his members of Christ's body. You are a member of Christ's body, and so is the person if they belong to Jesus.

And so the first welcome we can offer anyone is to share about the Lord Jesus to them, the good news, so that they might come to believe in Jesus. That's the best welcome we can give to them, so that they belong to Christ.

And do this even when they are powerless to return any favors. Again, that's not how the world works, is it? We scratch other people's back because they can scratch our back.

Networking, which those of you about to start work or whatever later on in life, you'll get to hear a lot about networking. Networking is about giving time to those who might one day be useful to you, right?

[26:54] Rich people invite other rich people to their parties. Corporate entertainment is all about this. We don't waste our time and money on people who don't care or don't matter.

But friends, that's not how it should be among us. And so it's not limited to just welcoming children, but anyone and everyone who lacks status among us, lacks influence.

It could be the young, it could be the old, it could be the sick, it could be the weak. And sometimes the one that is most lowly among us is not that obvious because there are things that may be happening in other people's lives that is not visible to the naked eye.

And even as I speak, let me ask, do you have in mind who these people are in our midst? Do you know? Well, if you don't, will you ask the Lord to open your eyes and find out who they are and then therefore get to know them?

But if you do already, then let me encourage you, go and serve them, welcome them. And this is particularly important for those of us who are leaders, and I'm talking about myself, but also the other leaders.

[28:07] Because the real test of leadership is not how well you treat the influential people in church, including the pastor, but those who aren't, without influence.

And notice here that embedded in Jesus' teaching is yet another principle. Because if you desire to serve God, that's your goal, then when you welcome and honor the least among us, you welcome and honor Jesus, and then he says, you welcome and honor the one who sent me, that is God the Father.

So friends, I don't think it's possible to serve God without serving the least among us. Friends, as I close, I want to come back to the greater showman, but if you look at that slide, who do you most identify with in that whole cast?

Is it Hugh Jackman? Some of you think you might, based on your looks. Or is it the misfits that come to his circus?

You know, sometimes in our effort to be virtuous, we like to identify ourselves as Hugh, don't we? We're the hero. We've come to rescue the misfits in our life.

[29:30] But in reality, we're more like the misfits, aren't we? Particularly in God's eyes. We're broken. We're undesirable. We're not that great after all.

It's Jesus who comes along, not as the greatest showman, but as the greatest servant, who comes to rescue us by giving his own life of immeasurable value to save us, poor sinners.

We have nothing to offer in return except faith and complete trust in him. But then, here's the great thing, when we do believe in Jesus, even though we're still poor, we're empty handed, we don't have anything of our own, we then become rich in Christ.

Which means we cannot, once we believe in Jesus, maintain a poor me, pity party for ourselves.

Because even though we might be still the same in status in the world, we are now rich in Christ.

Which means even the very least among us has the opportunity to serve another, to be the servant of all that Jesus wants us to be.

[30:43] Right? So it doesn't matter. You don't need to have influence. You don't need to be important. You don't need to be a mature Christian. As long as you believe in Jesus, you can serve another.

And as you do, well, you're going to become like Jesus, isn't it? And then, without you knowing it, without you focusing on it, true greatness will come.

True greatness comes not by being self-focused, which, pity me, is still self-focused, isn't it? True greatness comes from being self-forgetful.

And to me, that's really exciting, isn't it? All of us can do it. In Christ, God has given us all this exciting opportunity to be great by serving others.

So let's pray and ask God to help us do that. Father, thank you for your son, Jesus, the greatest servant of all, who laid down his life and laid aside his glory so that we might be saved.

[31:45] teach us how we might be like him. Help us to long to be like him, to serve others, to welcome all, especially the least among us.

Humble us to do this with great joy in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.