

What makes greatness? If you watch TV, a soap opera might lead to believe that the good looking people are the greatest. A show like Shark Tank or The Apprentice might lead you to think that the wealthy people are the greatest. A detective show like CSI might lead you to think that the clever people are the greatest. In the world of sports, greatness is measured by performance. Touchdowns, baskets, homeruns or batting average. In the world of music it is measured by CD sales and Grammy awards. In the world of movies it's measured by box office sales and Oscars. Strangely, many of those people who rate very high with good looks, money, cleverness, or performance make the news for their failures. The beautiful actress goes missing and shows up at a rehab center. The millionaire is on wife number 6. The football star gets arrested for dogfighting. The Oscar winning actor can't take the pressure of fame and takes his own life.

What makes greatness? Jesus' disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. St. Mark doesn't write out the argument for us, but we can easily imagine what they must have said. Peter, James and John must have said, "Jesus takes us everywhere with him and he leaves the nine of you behind. We must be most important." Then Judas says, "He put me in charge of the money bag. I must be most important." Then Andrew says, "Wait a minute— I was one of the first disciples he called." Then Jesus says, "What were you arguing about on the road?" He knew very well what they were arguing about. He knew it was a stupid argument, and deep down, the disciples knew it was pretty stupid, too. So they hung their heads and kept quiet.

Jesus doesn't yell at them for talking stupid. He takes the time to teach them a lesson— it's a double lesson about greatness. Jesus shows us greatness with humble service— and invites us to follow him. He shows us greatness by giving us value— the price of his own blood.

This argument among the disciples about who's the greatest or who's more important seems to be the first of many. Shortly after this, James and John... hid behind their mother and had her ask Jesus, "Give my two boys special positions of honor in your kingdom" (Mark 10:35-45). The other ten disciples got angry, but Jesus said, "Even I didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). On Maundy Thursday on the way to the Upper Room the disciples had the same argument, and Jesus got up, took a towel and a bowl of water and began to wash their feet. As disciples, they already knew the greatness of their teacher. He showed greatness in service— always. He took little time for himself, and spent much time teaching, even instructing those who didn't want to be instructed. St. Paul wrote: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!" I have said it many times before. If God humbles himself, how can you and I be proud? If Jesus, the Son of God, came down from heaven, walked the earth and taught and healed, what right did his disciples have to argue about which of them was the greatest?

Jesus told them “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Jesus was speaking about himself, about his work, and inviting us to follow him. Forget about greatness. Serve. How many times does it happen that someone thinks he is great, and then spends all his time trying to prove it— really doing nothing useful for anyone. Jesus warned about the Pharisees who made a show of everything they did, praying in the public places, but really helping nobody. That kind of pride was in the hearts of the disciples, and it’s in you and me too. It’s one of the aspects of the Old Adam, to serve self and to forget about the needs of others. To think of self as most important. And when self is most important, other people and their needs are less important, even unimportant. When the disciples were arguing about which of them was most important, they were also considering others to be less or least important.

Last Monday night I was asked to attend a Tea Party gathering at the American Legion Hall off 466 and Rolling Acres. I was asked to do the opening devotion. I told the caller that I would be interested, but that I would like to experience a gathering first, to see if it was something I could or would do. The pastor who gave the opening remarks had charisma. But he was somewhat nauseating. He let everybody know about his talk show, about his book, about the thousands in his congregation, about the distance he had traveled, and how one of his members was there as well. I had wished he had just stuck with his prayer for our country. It was like he was caught up in his own self-importance.

We can face a similar situation at Open Bible. Sometimes when we look at our church family, we might think that certain people are more important than others. Look what they have done. Look at the position they hold in the church. But greatness in Christ’s kingdom comes through humble service. Jesus once said, “The greatest in my kingdom is the servant of all.” So if you are humbling making quilts, folding bulletins, sweeping floors, you are great in God’s Kingdom even if you haven’t been on a board, or done something monumental in the history of Open Bible. Greatness is seen in humble service.

Furthermore, Jesus shows us greatness by giving us value— the price of his own blood. So Jesus taught them a second lesson about greatness and importance. He called over a small child— someone who can’t do too much work. That baby can’t make a million in the stock market. That baby can’t play professional sports. That baby can’t purchase a large home and drive a fancy car. That baby doesn’t have the title of Dr. or Judge in front of their names. That baby may be aborted or abused in today’s world. And yet that baby is extremely significant. In addition, that baby may be taken care of by a Mr. Mom, or a woman who devotes herself for a few years to being a full-time mother. A very lowly position in today’s economic world. Yet, even helping a children in Jesus’ name spiritually, physically or emotionally is great in the kingdom of God. Mr. Mom or Homemaker Mom are great in Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.” That reminds us of what Jesus taught about the Last Judgment.... “I was hungry and you gave me food... I was thirsty and you gave me drink.... whatever you have done for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you have done for me.” Jesus counts us as valuable because he came to this world to be

our Redeemer. He calls us “brothers” because he became fully human. He even calls “the least of these” ... “brothers of mine.” You have value because Jesus lived, died and rose for you. You are important no matter how seemingly unimportant society may think you are. Greatness comes from simply being a child of God in Jesus Christ.

There are times when we feel worthless. You wake up in the morning with a terrible cold. You have an unproductive day. Or because of weakness or pain you feel down, worthless. Or you have a failure of some kind. A student flunks a test. Your workplace is downsizing or closing. You forgot something important, a birthday or anniversary and got humiliated because of it. Regardless of how you feel, you are not worthless. You still have the value that God himself put upon you. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” You are worth just as much to your heavenly Father as Jesus, his beloved Son, because he gave up Jesus for you. Think of that when you feel worthless.

And think of that at other times, too. Think of that when you feel superior to someone else. When you’re mad at someone... When you look at the cover page of the daily paper and see a guy in an orange jumpsuit who just got arrested or convicted of some crime. They are included in the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus, too. They are included in the “world” in “God so loved the world.” They may not know it. They may have forgotten their worth in Christ— but the love of God is there for them, too... the least of Christ’s brothers.

Jesus turns all ideas of human greatness upside down. Our worth is not in what we have... not in what we do... not in how we look. Our worth is in how he looks at us. Our worth is not in how we feel. Not in what we have done. Not in what we have lost. Our worth is in the gift of God, Jesus Christ. He calls us to follow him in loving and serving all, just as he loved, served, and gave himself for all. Who is the greatest? Jesus is. And because of him, God counts you as precious, too.