

True Greatness

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- [0 : 00] Well, who is the goat? Who's the goat? By goat, I'm talking about that sporting term which refers to the greatest of all time. This past week, Ronnie O'Sullivan was called the goat of snooker.
- I'm not really interested in snooker, but I heard the word goat and I thought, well, there's lots of people who are referred to as the goat. So you've got Cristiano Ronaldo, the goat in football, the greatest of all time.
- Serena Williams, referred to as the goat in tennis. Tiger Woods, the goat in golf. Usain Bolt, the goat in sprinting for being the fastest man in history.
- Michael Jordan is the goat in basketball, although some would say LeBron James is taking that title from him. Simone Biles, the goat in gymnastics.
- Alex, Michael Phelps, the goat in swimming. And Tom Brady, the undisputed goat in NFL, American football. So all these individuals have attained greatness in their sport because of their skill, because of their success.
- [1 : 05] And so they're regarded as the goat, the greatest of all time. But it's not just in sport. It might be in business or it might be in politics or really any area of life. It is those who are skillful, those who are successful, those who achieve, who are regarded as the greatest.
- Because in the eyes of the world, greatness is defined by ability, by power, by influence, by skill and by success. Because these are the values that our world is obsessed by.
- And so we honor people who display all of these values. But in our Bible reading, when it comes to greatness, what Jesus does is he turns the values of the world on their head.
- Because what Jesus teaches us about greatness in this passage is counter-cultural. It was then and it still is today. Because Jesus subverts our understanding of greatness to show us what true greatness really is.
- And it comes in the context of Jesus teaching about his suffering and death. And so through his own life and through his work and through his teaching, Jesus provides us with the model of true greatness for his disciples at the time, but also for us today.
- [2 : 26] And so whether you're here this afternoon and you'd call yourself a Christian, or you're not sure where you stand in relation to God or what you believe, then what Jesus shows us here is what true greatness really looks like.
- And so this afternoon, there's four points we're going to think about when it comes to true greatness. True greatness is seeing the king on a cross. True greatness is seeing yourself as a servant. True greatness is seeing others as valuable.
- True greatness is seeing your sin as serious. So everything that the world says, Jesus says the opposite. So let's see why.
- First of all, seeing the king on a cross. Now this is the second time that Jesus predicted his death and his resurrection. It's there, verse 30 to 32. So they left that place and passed through Galilee.

Jesus did not want anyone to know they were there 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.

[3 : 28] And after three days, he will rise. But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. Okay, so Jesus predicted his death.

Chapter 8, verse 31. Here he is second down predicting his death. And as it says, he passed through Galilee. That means he's going towards Jerusalem.

And what happened in Jerusalem was that Jesus died. And so Jesus is moving towards his death. And so he wants to be alone with his disciples to teach them what his death means.

What it is about because they still didn't understand. And they needed to grasp that Jesus was the king. But the king who would die on a cross.

Because you notice, verse 31, that Jesus refers to himself as the son of man. Now he is identifying himself with this figure in the Old Testament. Daniel chapter 7.

[4 : 23] The heavenly son of man. A figure with ultimate power and ultimate authority. So Jesus is saying that's who he is. And yet, he's saying he will be delivered into the hands of men who will kill him.

So as well as identifying himself with a powerful son of man, Jesus is also identifying himself with a suffering servant. Also in the Old Testament. In Isaiah chapter 53.

So Jesus is saying that simultaneously he is this figure of power. But also this figure of shame. In other words, he is the king. But the king who would give up his life and die on a cross.

And that's why Jesus came. That's the point of Christianity. Jesus came to die because our sin separates us from God.

Jesus came to deal with our sin by taking it on himself on the cross. So that we can be accepted by God. Because we can never pay for our sins ourself. We can never get ourselves right with God.

[5 : 28] That's why Jesus came to do that work for us. The good news is that Jesus did not come to be served. But to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And so here, Jesus is teaching his disciples that this is the way it must be for him. It must be that way for him. And it will also be that way for them. Now this is the second time Jesus has explicitly told his disciples he would die.

But the disciples just can't get their heads around it. I guess they liked hearing about the power and strength of the Son of Man. Conquering. Authoritative. Powerful.

But the shame and the weakness of the suffering servant is not something they were so keen on. It was less appealing. And yet they needed to see Jesus as the servant king who would suffer and die.

Because if they were going to follow Jesus, then they would have to go through the same path. The same way as Jesus. And yet they didn't understand. And it says they're even afraid to ask him about it.

[6 : 37] And perhaps they were afraid because they knew that if Jesus had to die, it would mean that they too had to die. Jesus had said to them in Mark chapter 8 verse 34, Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.

And if they couldn't get in their heads, if they couldn't understand why their king must be killed on a cross, then they would never be ready for that themselves.

And yet this, according to Jesus, is true greatness. Because remember how Mark began his gospel by telling us that Jesus is the Messiah. He is God's king.

He is the Son of God. Jesus is the greatest of all time. And yet, Mark's pointing us towards the cross. Saying that's who he is.

But here is what he came to do. He came to die. And he was willing to die. And so can you see how Jesus turns our worldly notions of greatness on their head?

[7 : 44] And how Jesus sets the pattern for everybody who will follow him. It's also counter-cultural, even counter-intuitive, that this would be the way that Jesus goes himself and the way he calls his people to go.

Doesn't seem to make sense. But unless we understand who Jesus truly is and understand why he came, then we'll never grasp what true greatness really means.

So that's the first thing. True greatness is seeing the king on a cross. Secondly, true greatness is seeing yourself as a servant. Verse 33 to 37. Now, Jesus has just told his disciples that he is going to be killed.

And what are they doing? They're arguing about who is the greatest. Verse 33. 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. Can you see the jarring difference here? Jesus was going to give up his life, but they are only interested in fulfilling theirs.

[8 : 52] Now, back then, status, honor, reputation was all important. And so it was common for people to argue about who was the greatest and who deserved the most honor.

Who should be up there in the pecking order? And who deserved recognition? And so Jesus has to teach them that following him is about service.

It isn't about status. And so in stark contrast to their rivalry for honor and for recognition, we read verse 35, It's interesting the word for servant here does mean a person who serves.

And who sees to the needs of others. But it's also the word that's used for those who would wait on tables. So this is the kind of service that's often considered to be demeaning.

The kind of minimum wage job kind of service. That's what this is. And so Jesus is saying that true greatness comes through this kind of service. It isn't about being first.

[10 : 01] It isn't about being served. It's about being the very last and being the servant. That's the only way to follow Jesus. Well, wait.

What? Why? Because it's exactly what Jesus would model himself in his death, isn't it? Jesus is not calling anyone to do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself.

He's the supreme example of his own teaching. He sets the pattern for his people. And he even uses this visual aid to drive his point home.

Verse 36 and 37. He took a little child whom he placed among them. 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. See what Jesus does? He gets the smallest, the most insignificant person in the house that they were in, and he gets them to come.

[11 : 02] And he picks up this child, and he embraces this child in his arms. Now, in those days, children weren't idolized the same way that children are idolized today.

Back then, children had no rights. They had no power, no status. They were the least important, least significant members of society. They were the bottom of the social pile.

But Jesus picks up this child to embrace them. Because by welcoming the little child, Jesus was showing that's what it means to be the servant of all.

What he's saying is, his people must be prepared to welcome those in society who are the very weakest. Those who are regarded as the least important and as the most insignificant.

Jesus is saying those are the people you need to welcome and associate with and be with. They're the ones that you're called to serve. The people that nobody else cares about or gives a second thought to.

[12 : 06] But there's more here. Because welcoming such people is actually welcoming Jesus. And therefore, welcoming God. And that's why true greatness is seeing yourself as a servant.

So, Jesus' words, just as we think about how we apply this to ourselves, they are as counter-cultural today as they were when he first spoke them. Because we just love recognition, don't we?

We like to be honored for what we do. We enjoy receiving personal kudos. Kudos. It's funny how kudos is that word that's used in that exercise app, Strava, for giving somebody recognition or honor or saying you like what they do.

I do know that half of you use Strava already. But if you don't, it's an app that somehow records you're running, you're swimming, you're cycling, whatever. And it gives you your time, your distance, your pace, elevation, heart rate, and a million other things that you don't need to know about.

And all of your activity, all of your stats are there for all your followers to see. So they can give you honor and recognition or praise by hitting the kudos button.

[13 : 23] And it's often heard within our household with some sadness in the voice of the one saying it, nobody's given me kudos for that run. Hmm. In other words, I haven't received the honor I think I'm due.

I haven't got what I feel I deserve. In fact, I have a friend on Strava who stopped coming up on my Strava feed. So I said, I haven't seen you recently on Strava, William.

And I didn't mean to give you his name, but anyway, William. William, are you still running? And guess what he said? He said, my watch broke. And when my watch broke, I couldn't record my runs.

And so I couldn't upload them onto Strava. So then I thought, what's the point if nobody can see all the hard work I'm doing? Now, get this, the point is not about Strava, but it is that desire that is in our hearts that craves honor and craves recognition.

Like you put something on Facebook and you look to see how many people have liked it because you want it to be recognized. And of course, we're not going to openly argue about who is the greatest over tea and coffee afterwards in church, at least I hope we're not.

[14 : 33] But we still like honor. We still like recognition. And we like anything that will bolster our status. And we're disappointed when we don't get it. It's because we simply enjoy status more than we enjoy serving.

Because our world recognizes status more than it does service. And even within the church, we can be more concerned about our status or our position than we are about serving people for the sake of Jesus.

And that's why Jesus had to smash the disciples' pathetic notion of greatness. I mean, you can hardly imagine the disciples signing up on the rota for creche, can you?

They were far too important, far too deserving of greater honor than helping the little people. And of course, I'm not saying the application is that you must sign up on the creche rota, although I'm sure there are spaces on the creche rota if you do want to sign up.

But the point is, are we really willing to serve anyone? And are we really willing to serve them at any time? So whoever we regard as the least and the last and the lost, and I'm sure we can think of them, are we willing to serve that person?

[15 : 53] Because we should never be thinking, that person is beneath me, or I am too important for that job. That role is beneath me. And do you know why we should never be thinking in that way?

Well, we just need to look at Jesus, don't we? And see true greatness. He is the greatest, and yet he was willing to serve and to welcome us.

So that's the second thing, true greatness. First of all, is seeing the king on a cross. True greatness is seeing yourself as a servant. And thirdly, true greatness is seeing others as valuable. Okay, so Jesus had just been telling his disciples about welcoming everybody, but there's another crunching gear change thanks to John.

So verse 38, Teacher, said John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he was not one of us. So here's John, and he thinks the disciples have got the right to decide who's in and who's out.

And his words really, I guess, expose the critical spirit within his heart because he sees this man casting out demons in Jesus' name. And the irony, of course, is that this man had succeeded where the disciples had earlier failed, just earlier in chapter 9.

[17 : 12] And so John was upset because he wasn't one of the disciples. Who does he think he is? How dare he drive out demons and not be a card-carrying follower of Jesus?

John actually says in the original, he was not following us, as if the disciples were so great that they're the ones who are to be followed. And so it doesn't mean that this man wasn't a follower of Jesus.

It's just that he wasn't one of the 12. And yet, he has this effective ministry. And yet, John is more concerned that he wasn't one of their group than he was about God's kingdom advancing.

And yet, Jesus refuses to side with John. Verse 39, Do not stop him, Jesus said, for no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me.

For whoever is not against us is for us. So he is Jesus, and he is far more inclusive than his disciples. So Jesus wasn't going to stop the man.

[18 : 20] He was working in Jesus' name, and so he was involved in kingdom work. Work that wasn't restricted to the disciples, because Jesus teaches whoever is not against us is for us.

And that's what mattered for Jesus. Not whether he was one of the 12, but whether he was one of his. Because it wasn't just the disciples who belonged to Jesus.

Of course, the disciples enjoyed this exclusive relationship with Jesus, but it wasn't all about them. It was all about the kingdom of God, which Jesus brought, which would include many people.

And later, including us, of course. And so, can you see what Jesus does here? He exposes an attitude that we can all be guilty of. One that looks down on others, because they don't belong to our particular group.

Because in the kingdom of God, it doesn't really matter who belongs to our church, our denomination, our network, or our tribe. What matters is that people belong to Jesus.

[19 : 29] And that's why we can't be like the disciples and criticize those who are not part of our camp. Because God advances his kingdom through his people, and so we must value all of God's people.

God is not limited, thankfully, to accomplishing his work through the people and through the places that we give the rubber stamp to, is he?

God's work is far bigger than our tiny bubble. So it's more important than our people, than our preferences, than our positions, than our style, our brand, our traditions, our preachers, our seminaries, our podcasts, our Christian celebrities.

The kingdom of God is more important. Belonging to Jesus and working in his name for his kingdom is the priority. And that's why it's so tragic that the disciples would rather stop good kingdom work than have it done by anyone else.

And sadly, this does still continue in churches today. I've encountered it myself. When we were starting Christ Church Glasgow, some Christians and other churches in Glasgow weren't happy at seeing a new church start because it wasn't being done in their way or it wasn't being done in the place where they thought it should be done.

[20 : 55] And it didn't really get their seal of approval. But here we are. And can you see, it is just so tragic when people care more about themselves and they care more about building their little empire than they do about Jesus and building the everlasting kingdom of God.

And again, Jesus illustrates this in his teaching. Verse 41, Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

He's not saying handing out cups of water outside will get you into heaven. It's not what he's saying. But he is saying any act of service, like the smallest and least thing, like a cup of water, will be rewarded if it's done for him.

And so Jesus is warning against looking down on humble acts of service as if thinking they're insignificant or they don't matter. Because any ministry, any ministry, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, shouldn't be dismissed.

So it might be Martin going to Hanoi Bible College teaching people theology, or it might be Jennifer mopping up the mashed mess that Luke has spat out that's on the floor.

[22 : 14] They're both significant in the kingdom of God. Isn't that what Jesus is saying here? And so it isn't exactly rocket science what he's saying. Because in our hearts, we should recognize that whatever we do for Jesus is valuable.

It's significant in his kingdom, no matter what it is. So true greatness. Thirdly, seeing others is valuable. And finally and fourthly, true greatness is seeing your sin as serious.

Again, Jesus uses some good illustrations here to teach about the nature of sin. So first he warns the disciples of the consequences of leading others into sin.

And then he warns them about their own sins. So verse 42, If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

That is a sobering statement. Who are the little ones that Jesus mentions? Well, he's not just talking about little children, but really any follower of Jesus, no matter how young or old or whatever age or stage in faith.

[23 : 25] He's saying it would be better to be thrown in the sea with a millstone around your neck than cause one of these little ones to stumble. So a millstone, it was and is a big cylindrical bit of rock, really, that was used to grind grain.

So heavy, sometimes a donkey would push it or pull it. And so Jesus is picturing a terrible way to die. Now why does he do that? Why pick such a shocking illustration?

Well, it's because sin is so serious. And if we cause someone else to stumble and sin, Jesus is saying we deserve this kind of death.

And so it's a sobering warning, isn't it? And yet it does happen. It happens in churches. It might be through false teaching. It might be by encouraging sinful behavior.

It might be by the failure to deal with an issue or maybe failure to discipline a person because all sin is a serious offense against God.

[24 : 31] That's why Jesus had to die on a cross. And that's why we must make sure that we don't cause somebody else to sin. But the second thing he says here is that we also need to take radical action by dealing with our own sin.

And that's this point in verse 43 to 48 when Jesus says, if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed and with two hands to go to hell where the fire never goes out.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell and so on. So does Jesus want us to take his words literally here?

Is he encouraging self-mutilation? Well, of course he's not. Jesus has already made it clear in Mark chapter 7 that sin is a matter of the heart.

And so chopping off your body parts isn't going to go deep down and really deal with the root of the problem, which is our hearts. And so the obvious application here is that we've got to get rid of anything in our life that tempts us to sin.

[25 : 40] Because our sin is so serious, Jesus says it will take a person to hell. And so he's saying there can be no room for negotiation with sin.

Because if we're not working to kill sin in our lives, then sin will be killing us. There was once an illustration, let me tell you, there was once a man in a church prayer meeting who would always say the same prayer every week.

And he'd pray, Oh God, help clean the cobwebs out of my life. Every week, the same prayer. God, help clean the cobwebs out of my life.

And the minister just couldn't take anymore. And so one week after the man had just prayed, Oh God, help clean the cobwebs out of my life. The minister shouted out, No!

He said, God, kill the spider. Just kill the stupid spider. Can you see that? Our sin is so serious that it needs killing.

[26 : 42] And that's why Jesus urges us to perform radical surgery and to amputate anything in our lives that causes us to sin. And I'm sure we know things in our lives that do cause us to stumble and sin.

There are temptations that we are aware of. Is it our hands in what we do? How we behave? Is it our feet where we go?

The things we do. Is it our eyes what we look at or what we lust after? Jesus could not be more direct and he could not be more practical and he could not be more pastoral in what he says.

He doesn't want anyone to be going to hell because of their sin. And if we fail to deal with sin we risk suffering and eternity in hell.

And so all this talk of hell brings Jesus on to speak about fire. Verse 49. Everyone will be salted with fire. What does he mean? Well the fire could follow on from what's just been said by describing suffering and punishment in hell.

[27 : 55] Or it could refer to what Jesus is going on to say when he speaks about salt. Verse 50. Salt is good but if it loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other.

Now in the Old Testament salt was added to sacrifices. And so Jesus may be saying as we offer our lives to him by way of a sacrifice we'll be salted with fire.

In other words we'll be made pure as trials as sufferings come our way as we're tested in flames of suffering then we'll be purified refined.

So he could be referring to a punishing fire or he could be referring to a purifying fire. But what Jesus says at the end what he is saying is that we need to have salt in ourselves.

Salt we know is a preservative. If it loses its saltiness it's useless. And so Jesus wants his followers to have this preserving influence on the world.

[28 : 59] And that's why I think it's vital he says that we need to deal with our sin. Because if we don't deal with our sin we're having no preserving influence on the world that we are trying to reach for Jesus Christ.

we'll never be able to showcase the beauty and the goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ if we're no different from the world around us. If the values we pursue are not the values that Jesus wants us to pursue as one of his followers we'll have no impact on the world.

And so as we close true greatness is seeing the king on a cross isn't it? So don't fail don't fail to see Jesus the son of God the king the Messiah dying on a cross for you.

The one with absolute power and authority the ruler and king over all things giving up his life and dying so that we could be accepted by God.

But Jesus as well as being the saviour he also models a way of life for us doesn't he? So just think how do you see yourself?

[30 : 10] Do you see yourself as a servant? And how do you see others? Do you see them as valuable whoever they are? And how do you see your sin? Do you see it as offensive to God and deserving of hell?

Because how we answer those questions will determine how we live our lives. So how are you going to live your life? Are you going to follow Jesus in the way of true greatness?

Or are you going to seek greatness in the eyes of this world? Because greatness in the eyes of this world simply means aping the values of this world and just being like everybody else.

Being a clone thinking the same things everybody else thinks dressing the same way everybody else dresses living the same way. Everybody else lives. There's nothing radical about that, is there?

But following Jesus is radical. It's radical because Jesus teaches a way that is counter-cultural because it is a reversal of all the world's values.

[31 : 15] And yet it is the way to true greatness because it is to follow the one who is the greatest Jesus. The one who willingly came to serve us by giving up his life so we could be welcomed by God.

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