

## CREATED FOR GREATNESS – Greatness Redefined

6/25/17- Pastor Randy

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If you follow sports, specifically the NBA, you are probably aware of all the recent discussions surrounding the question of who is the greatest to ever play in the NBA. The Michael Jordan vs. LeBron James debate has consumed tons of ink and air time. During this year's playoffs, retired NBA players, apparently jealous that they were left out of this "who is the greatest" discussion, began to make comments about how the championship team they played for was greater and could beat the modern day Warriors or Cavs. Of course these debates are fruitless and meaningless, but they attract interest because we love debates about who is the greatest.

Our political system is to a great degree corrupted by this very problem. Nietzsche, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, identified the main driving force behind all our actions as the "will to power"; selfish ambition, the drive to achieve superiority, the need to win, to conquer one's opponent, to be in control. Unfortunately, he did not view this aspect of human nature as the destructive force that God reveals it to be. Our lust for power and control is a manifestation of the sin of pride which is at the root of all sin.

*"Pride is the commencement of all sin' because it was this which overthrew the devil, from whom arose the origin of sin; and afterwards, when his malice and envy pursued man, who was yet standing in his uprightness, it subverted him in the same way in which he himself fell. For the serpent, in fact, only sought for the door of pride whereby to enter when he said, 'Ye shall be as gods.'"*

— St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.)

When leaders in our political, educational, business, or religious institutions, are driven by the will to power, the needs of the people whom the leaders are supposed to be serving get placed on the backburner. The needs of the people become subordinated to the leaders' lust for power, dominance, and control. As kids we played games like "king of the hill"; we pushed and shoved to get to the front of the line. If you couldn't be the strongest, you tried to be

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the smartest, or the funniest, or the best-looking. It didn't matter what it was; we just wanted to be recognized as great in some way. Now as adults, although the games and the aims are different, we still struggle to be "king of the hill"; to be at the "front of the line". We want to be great...or just greater.

Mark 10:35-45 (ESV)

*And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Our passage begins with James & John, two of the three members of Jesus inner circle of disciples, approaching Jesus with this statement: ***"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."*** Have you ever had someone approach you and say, "Would you do me a favor?" How many of you ask what the favor is before agreeing to grant it? You do that because you are smart and you know it is not wise to make a promise before you know what you are agreeing to. That is exactly what Jesus did. He asked what they wanted from him, before agreeing to anything.

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James and John responded, *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* To understand their request we need to look back at the discussion that preceded it. In verse 32-34 we read,

*“And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”*

Jesus told them they were going to Jerusalem and he identified himself as the Son of Man. The “Son of Man” was a messianic title. Even though the gospels are clear that the disciples did not really grasp Jesus predictions concerning his death and resurrection, they apparently did believe that Jesus was going to fulfill the messianic expectation by restoring Israel's kingdom and ascending to the throne in Jerusalem. James and John are like typical kids in the classroom when it is time for recess. They are jockeying to be first in line. What is so strikingly disturbing about this request is that it follows on the heels of Jesus' prediction of his imminent suffering and death.

Here Jesus is, sharing intimately about his impending torture and death, which he would submit to for their benefit, and not just for their benefit, but in their place. And all they can think about is the opportunity for them to seize a position of honor and glory for themselves. Jesus should have been insulted by their insensitivity.

Jesus responded to them, *“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”*

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When Jesus spoke about the “cup he would drink” and the “baptism” he would undergo, he was communicating something significant about the purpose of His suffering and death. The image of the cup and baptism were employed in the OT in reference to suffering as a result of God’s judgement. Jesus was communicating that his suffering was going to be both from sin and for sin. As William Lane wrote, “...the images of the cup and baptism signify that He bears the judgment merited by the sins of men”. The reason Jesus is exalted to the place of greatest glory is because he made the ultimate and supreme sacrifice for us.

They naively replied, “***We are able.***” This whole passage reveals a striking contrast between Jesus humble, selfless, desire to serve them by suffering for them and their arrogant, selfish, self-preoccupation with attaining a position of glory for themselves. The truth which they did not even know is that their association and identification with Jesus would eventually lead to suffering. Jesus could have encouraged them by assuring them that they would receive glory in the future eternal Kingdom of God, but he chose to not entertain a discussion about that. Why? Because he wanted to get their minds off of how to exalt themselves above others and instill in them the value and importance of serving the needs of others.

This exchange between Jesus and James and John is overheard by the other disciples and they are ticked off! We don’t know what they said to them but whatever they said prompted Jesus to call of them over and lecture them because once again they were acting like school children fighting with one another over who gets to go first, who is better than who, etc. Yes, I did say “once again”. This is not the first time the disciples manifested problems with their pride and their preoccupation with greatness. In Mark chapter 9, perhaps only days earlier, mark tells us that Jesus disciples came to a house in Capernaum where Jesus was and Jesus asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” The response? Crickets. No one wanted to answer

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because they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. So this request of James and John is not a momentary lapse, but a revelation of an ingrained distorted understanding about the meaning of greatness.

Jesus responded by saying, *“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

These words were a painful “smackdown”, to use contemporary vernacular. Jesus compared their actions with the behavior of the very people who they considered their oppressors. Jesus said, you guys keep arguing over who is the greatest. You want to be great? Stop seeking glory and positions of greater status for yourselves and start serving the needs of others. Stop conforming to the behavior modeled by the world, and start following the example I have set for you.

Here are lessons we should learn from this passage:

1. God has created us for Greatness

A desire to do something great with your life is not an unholy desire. God created us for greatness. Through his atoning work on the cross he has recreated us for greatness. Jesus problem was not with becoming “great”. Jesus said, *“But whoever would be great among you must....”* Jesus wanted his disciples to be great, but the problem was that as long as they wanted achieve great status, they would never be able engage in great service. Their problem was with definition of greatness. Christianity does not undermine ambition, only selfish ambition. The gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit fuels ambition, an ambition not to make a name for ourselves to make a

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difference for the glory of God and the good of others. God has created you in His image, to think great thoughts, to do great works, to love greatly.

2. Greatness does not consist in commanding and controlling others, but in loving sacrifice that serves the best interests of others.

Jesus is the one who founded the concept of servant-leadership. The servant leader views his position of power and authority, not as a means of serving his self-interest, but as a means of serving those under his leadership.

Greatness is measured by how much we have done for the good of others, not by how much we have gotten others to do for us!

3. A servant is not a people pleaser. In this passage where Jesus calls his disciples to take the role of servants, He set Himself up as the example for them to follow. If being a servant meant living at the beck and call of others, always doing whatever everyone else wants you to do, then Jesus was in violation of His own teaching. Jesus did not grant James and John's request. He came to serve James and John, and that was accomplished by acting in a manner that served their best interests, not their self-interests.

4. To become great in God's eyes we must die to our desire to be considered great by others.

James and John erred because they wanted to be viewed as someone who was great, rather than do something that was great." They wanted to occupy a great seat rather than perform a great service. For too many people their concern is to be considered great rather than being great. They want the label "Great" affixed to their life without doing anything that warrants the label. Another perversion of Jesus' teaching is to sacrifice for the purpose of gaining the label for ourselves. There is currently in the ministry an idol forming around the virtue of risk-taking. Experts on the subject of leadership have pointed out that a willingness to take risks - significant risks - are essential to achieving a significant measure of success. That is absolutely

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true! The problem arises, however, when we allow ourselves to be seduced by the Devil into risky pursuits, not motivated by a Holy Spirit-inspired love for God and people, but by a demonic inspired need to be admired. Great sacrifices are made, not to serve mankind, but to experience admiration and applause, to gain recognition and respect. We can't be great worshippers of God and servants of man while worshipping and serving self.

God wants to make us truly great by crucifying and eradicating our desire to be considered great in the eyes of men. When that drive...that desire to exalt ourselves... to draw attention to ourselves...to gain praise for ourselves, is uprooted from our heart, only then will we be free to pursue a life of true greatness as God defines it. Jesus came to deliver us from pride and selfish ambition, in order that we can be free from the chains of jealousy and envy. He came to free our minds from comparing ourselves with others. He came to free our hearts from the emotional roller coaster ride experienced by people whose peace and contentment is continually at the mercy of their social status. He came to set us free so we can serve. And as we serve others, the greatness of our God is formed in us.

The following is adapted from the story of the founders of Calcutta Mercy at <http://www.calcuttamercy.org/founder/>

*The year was 1954 when Mark and Huldah Buntain w/ their newborn baby began their missionary work in Calcutta India. When they arrived in Calcutta they discovered a city unlike any they had seen. Tens of thousands of people crowded the sidewalks and alleyways. Business men in freshly pressed suits climbed aboard rickshaws in a rush to meet clients; women nursed their children on the curbside; families peddled wares on a mosaic of blankets. Most shocking were the thousands of families devoid of work, shelter, and proper food and hygiene. Emaciated elderly men lay nearly naked on raw concrete. To their right and left, parents sat listlessly, their bony frames painfully jutting forth beneath their withered skin, duly pronounced from months of hunger. And what to say of the children? There were children with*

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*cataracts or no eyes at all, and others with teeth splayed up through the nose, their cleft palates hindering their ability to eat and even breathe. Babies shrieked from the pain of dysentery and toddlers crawled awkwardly with limited use of their broken and deformed limbs. It seemed in Calcutta, you either lived well or barely stayed alive. Mark and Huldah spent their first year learning the needs and desires of the poor in Calcutta. They needed food, education, and medical assistance. They needed someone to give. They begged for someone to care.*

*Mark, the visionary, and Huldah, the tenacious administrator, wasted no time beginning a series of ambitious projects for the poor. In 1964, the Buntains opened their first school for 200 children. A year later, they began a feeding program, starting with free school lunches of milk and parathas. Concerned for the sick and injured, they built a small clinic followed by a multi-specialty hospital and outpatient facility.*

*Thirty-five years later Mark passed away suddenly. Over 20,000 residents turned out for Mark's funeral. Mother Teresa, a close friend of Mark's told Huldah, "I will miss [Mark] very much. We worked well together. You must carry on the good work. We must continue loving the poor."*

*Huldah celebrated 60 years in Calcutta in 2014. Today, Calcutta Mission of Mercy feeds over 10,000 people six days a week, provides education for 32,000 students, and provides medical assistance to 40,000 people each year at no cost to them.*

Few Americans have ever heard of Mark Buntain, but he was a great man. He was a great man who never knew he was great, because he was consumed with bringing glory to his great God and performing a great service to people. That is what greatness is all about.

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Mark Bidwell

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1. Shows greater concern for assuming his/her responsibilities than claiming his/her rights
2. Initiates service rather than serving only when asked.
3. Serves willingly and not for a reward
4. Is willing to help others advance at his/her own expense. – Valued.
5. Desires to bring God glory rather than to seek it for him/herself.
6. Is not too proud to serve the “lowly” or perform the “menial” task.
7. LOVES GOD and PEOPLE