

The Greatest

In the name of him who *is* the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you've seen them. You find them in gift shops and novelty stores: those trophies, coffee mugs, T-shirts, placards, and other sundry bric-a-brac that bear a label proudly announcing "World's Greatest Dad", "World's Greatest Mom", "World's Greatest Grandparent, Aunt, Uncle, Doctor, Nurse, Golfer, Tennis Player, Couch Potato" ... whatever. Name a category of human endeavor and they have one for it. No, strike that: they have *many* for it, which is pretty ironic. Think about it: they must produce these things by the tens of thousands; but by definition for each category there can only be one person who legitimately holds the title. There can only be one world's greatest anything. Yet they must sell these things by the case.

Sure, I understand that these trinkets are not meant to be taken literally; rather they are intended to be given as gifts that express the giver's gratitude and admiration. To be more precise, they are gifts especially designed to be purchased by people lacking imagination who are in a hurry and don't want to spend a lot of money to express their gratitude and admiration. It's the thought that counts, right? But then again, maybe it's not so ironic that they can make and sell thousands of these items that declare that the possessor is the world's greatest something. That's because for every category of human endeavor that exists there are a lot of people who think they deserve the title "world's greatest". And I'm sure there are vast numbers more who think that if they're not the greatest, then they're awfully close.

In a broader sense, it is a symptom of our sinfulness that we tend to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We have achievements of which we are proud and for which we believe we have not received proper recognition nor have we been adequately praised. And even if we can't name particular skills we can do or accomplishments that have done better than anyone else, we still have the sense that overall, if you evaluate the whole package and take all things into consideration, I'm a better person than most people – certainly a lot better than those I have to deal with on a daily basis. Their flaws and shortcomings are abundant and obvious. Mine, the few that I have, are much less severe and hardly noticeable; and besides, I have good excuses for them. Indeed, most of them are someone else's fault.

These are the attitudes and traits we sinners share that are being highlighted in today's Gospel. Concealing their movements from the vast crowds that appear and follow him wherever he goes, Jesus has taken his twelve disciples aside for some private instruction. He wants to prepare them what's about to happen because right now, they don't get it. At this point they *do* know who Jesus is. They have seen his power. They have heard his teaching. And they have all confessed that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. They know him to be Israel's long promised Savior and Messiah.

The trouble is they don't know what that means. They are thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom: power, riches, fame, honor, and glory. They envision Jesus taking Jerusalem by storm, driving out all opposition, and setting up God's kingdom on earth. They see themselves as his handpicked and most trusted advisors, the ones who will be his white house staff and chief administrators in the greatest kingdom the world have ever known. They see themselves as the greatest men in this greatest kingdom. And they deliberately tune out anything they hear that contradicts the dreams of glory that fill their imaginations.

It speaks of Jesus' vast patience that he tries repeatedly to get through to them. He tells them, "You don't understand. We're going to Jerusalem, yes; but when we get there the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." And we want to take that as a summary statement of all that Jesus told them. In their time alone there's no doubt that Jesus explained the *whole* thing: how it was his mission not to be an earthly king who would be served, but rather to be the Lamb of God who would serve by suffering and dying to atone for the sins of the world.

But no matter how many times or how patiently he explained it to them, they weren't getting it. Instead, we're told that when they thought Jesus wasn't listening, they bickered among themselves about which of them was the greatest. It wasn't enough to be one of the twelve closest disciples, separated from the vast majority of humankind by that distinct honor – richly deserved, by the way – no, they had to establish a pecking order even among themselves. Funny thing is that they couldn't agree on what it should be. Each one saw himself in the top position. And we can well imagine the kind of boasting each one did to exalt himself and to belittle and discredit the others.

What's interesting to me is that their words are not recorded. All their boasting, the things of which they were most proud, the reasons for the honors they thought they deserved—these things are lost to us. And that says something about them: they all amounted to nothing. They weren't important at all. They weren't nearly as great as they thought they were. Only the words of Jesus remain: his words about his upcoming suffering and shameful death.

I find it interesting too that while the disciples had no trouble shooting off their mouths when they should have been silent, twice we find them silent when they should have spoken up. It turns out they actually do hear Jesus when he speaks of his impending death and resurrection. It doesn't make any sense to them. It didn't fit their preconceived notions. But they were afraid to ask him any questions about it. Why is that? It could be because they didn't want to have the bubbles of their dreams of glory burst. That was probably part of it. But the main thing is that asking a question like that would have revealed how little they understood. Each one thought, "If I ask, I'll look foolish – and that will undermine my campaign to convince the others that I'm the greatest." Not one understood and not one had the courage to ask. And so they all remained in the dark.

The other time they should have spoken up when was Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. This time shame holds their tongues. It's one thing to boast before your peers – the ones you're fighting to stay on top of. It's quite a bit harder to boast before the righteous Son of God who knows your heart better than you do; the Son of God who called you to follow him by his grace and grace alone without any merit or worthiness in you. This time they should have spoken up confessing their sins of pride, jealousy, and selfish ambition. But they didn't.

And so again, with infinite patience, Jesus sits them down and gives them a lesson on what it means to be truly great in God's kingdom. He tells them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and the servant of all." This foundational word of wisdom stands opposed to all worldly wisdom. The wisdom of this world says it's all about you. No one is more important than you. And no one is going to look out for your best interests better than you. So go for it. Climb as high as you can. Make use of every advantage. Take what you can get. Let nothing stop you from achieving your dreams. Go for fame, fortune, honor, and glory. And if you can't beat the competition fair and square, then cheat. It's okay. It's for a good cause: you. The world *is* the way it is – a dark and loveless place – because *this* is the wisdom on which it

operates. As James says in today's Epistle, "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."

God's kingdom operates on a different principle of wisdom. It's this: your life is not about you. It's about others and what you can do to attend their needs. So stop thinking of yourself. Stop thinking of making the most with what you've got to make yourself great. Think about others and what you can do for them with what God has given you.

This is the principle of divine wisdom that drives the Gospel of our salvation. God himself, in the person of the Son, though he is Lord of all, comes to this earth to take on our fallen flesh. He lives a perfect life of humble service on our behalf, and then he offers that life on the cross to suffer infinitely for our sins. And never at any moment is he thinking about what's good for him. He's only looking out for us and what we need: a Savior from sin. He, the greatest, makes himself the last and servant of all. And by his suffering, dying, and rising again he raises us also. He raises us from the death, disorder, and vile practices of this world's wisdom to the wisdom from above upon which his kingdom is founded. And he calls for us to be great in his kingdom by offering ourselves as living sacrifices in the service of others.

What does that look like? It could be anything. We tend to look for it in grand things like building hospitals, sending missionaries abroad, and founding charitable trusts; but it's just as easily found in small things. Let me give you a couple of examples. Greatness is seen in the volunteer who spends a few hours each week helping struggling first graders sound out words so they can learn to read better. Greatness is seen in spouses who remain faithful for a lifetime, who try to keep their vows to love, honor, and cherish each other until death parts them. I recall one woman I knew a few years ago. Her husband had Alzheimer's and was confined to a nursing home. He barely recognized her, and then only for brief moments of lucidity. And yet she'd sit patiently with him for three or four hours each day. She'd feed him his lunch, frequently wiping the drool from his chin. And she'd talk happily about their lives together while he fumbled with a few wooden blocks. This was hard and painful for her, I know. What made her service great was that she did it for him. Greatness is seen in a child who completes his or her assigned chores without complaining, not because they have to or they hope to be rewarded for it; but because it's the right thing to do. It's how they keep the commandment to love and honor their parents.

Again, that's the key to achieving greatness in God's kingdom. It's not about what you do to promote yourself, but what you do for the good of others without thinking of yourself. And so what it's about really is the attitude of the heart. Any work might be done for sinful selfishness or genuinely for the good others. Thus the same work might be either good or evil. To be sure, if when doing something for someone else you're thinking, "This will make me great in God's kingdom" you're doing it for the wrong reason. You're doing it for yourself and the reward you expect God will give you. And that makes even a good work a sin.

And if by now you're thinking that this wisdom from on high is a lot harder to understand than you once thought, good. You're with the disciples who didn't understand Jesus when he spoke of it. But don't be like them, afraid to speak. Ask Jesus to explain. And through study of his Word and the power of his Holy Spirit, he will. And if you're thinking that you've been caught red-handed seeking greatness for yourself (as you should be at this point), again, don't be like the disciples who were ashamed to speak. Confess your sins. Receive Christ's word of forgiveness. And ask him to create in you a clean heart that gladly seeks to serve.

For one thing's certain: opportunities for serving abound. The world is full of people with needs. Every one of us has them. And as my final point I want to stress that Jesus locates himself in our human needs. This is what he meant when, taking a child into his arms, he said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me." The word for receive there means to welcome with hospitality, that is, to care for them as if they were your guest and you were their host. In other words, attend their needs. But that's where we find Jesus, in the needs of our neighbor. He bears all the world's suffering, and so where there is want and need, he's there in the middle of it. And this is why on the Last Day he can say to those who on his right, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you visited me ...for truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." So you see, whenever we serve the least in God's kingdom, without seeing him, we are also serving the Greatest.

It is to this great work we have been called in Christ. Therefore, by his Word and Spirit, may our gracious God and Father accomplish his great work in us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!