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ATTAINING TRUE GREATNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SERVANTHOOD

True greatness is positive and God's children should desire it. However, when our primary focus is on attaining greatness, there is the danger of being tainted by negative elements such as a spirit of pride and superiority. So how can we attain greatness in a healthy way? How can we make sure that negative elements are not present?

How to attain true greatness in a healthy way

In my understanding, a more helpful way of attaining true greatness is by concentrating on making good progress in various positive areas of our lives which will help us attain true greatness. As we do so and make progress in these areas, we will then be making progress in attaining true greatness.

Concentrate on the Lord, on the truth and on developing positive qualities within

The most helpful approach to attaining true greatness is to concentrate on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the greatest and He is our perfect teacher. So we should reflect on His life and His teaching to consider how we can be more like Him. The scriptural goal for all believers is that we be conformed to the image of Christ and that Christ be formed in us (Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:19). This must be our primary concern.

How can Christ be formed in us? There are certain attributes of the Lord that cannot become ours, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience. But we can be like Him in moral attributes, such as humility and strength of character. True greatness in the kingdom of God has much to do with the moral and spiritual stature of the believer.

The Lord Jesus exemplified the hallmarks of the true heart of a servant. He came to serve, even to the point of laying down His life. It is not easy to have the heart of a servant – to maintain a humble and gentle spirit – especially when we face adverse circumstances and difficult people, and when we are under spiritual pressure and attacks. It requires strength of character to have the true heart of a servant, and we need to learn from the Lord Jesus on how to develop strength of character and how to persevere in serving God and man with humility and gentleness.

Along with concentrating on being more like the Lord Jesus in His character, we should also seek to live on the basis of truth and the will of God. This will require that

we also concentrate on knowing God and the truth and on nurturing our relationship with Him and having our minds renewed. As we grow in our knowledge of God and increasingly live according to the attitudes and ways of Christ, we will become increasingly conformed to the image of Christ, and we can then enjoy deepening fellowship and oneness with God and attain to true greatness.

Guard against a negative spirit of comparison and self-exaltation

A spirit of comparison is often present in the desire for greatness. A person usually desires to be greater, more powerful, more influential, and more capable than others. We may not always be aware of the presence of such a spirit. Sometimes there is a mixture of motives – we serve because we genuinely care for others, but there may also be the desire to be regarded as being more spiritual, more caring, more loving, than others.

Then there are also other negative aspirations, such as trying to draw attention to ourselves, desiring to be recognised and praised, enjoying the exercising of authority over others and being flattered.

At the heart of these problems is self-exaltation. This explains the response of the Lord Jesus to His disciples in Luke 9:46-48.

Luke 9:46-48

46 An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

47 But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side,

48 and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."

The disciples argued among themselves over which of them might be the greatest. The Lord Jesus responded: "... the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great". Some may find this statement difficult to understand. "Least" has the sense of being the lowliest, whereas greatness has the sense of being in an exalted position. So how can one who is least be great?

What the Lord Jesus was advocating is opposite to seeking prominence, power or authority. He wanted to correct the wrong notions and negative attitudes in the hearts of the disciples and so He made it very clear that the attitude and conduct of the one who is truly great is the very opposite of all the negative elements that are associated with worldly greatness. One who is truly great will be free from these negative elements. True greatness involves being "least" among others. The one who is truly great is the least – he does not exalt himself.

Our motivation to grow well and nurture positive qualities should not be because we want to be better than others or to be regarded as great, but because we recognise that these are what the Lord desires of us and because we desire what is good. Our attitudes and approach to life, and our ways and conduct, must be positive. Our service must be motivated by a sincere love for the Lord and for others.

Learn from the fall of Satan: pitfalls of pride and self-exaltation

Let us look at two passages generally recognised as referring to the fall of Satan.

Isaiah 14:12-14

12 "How you have fallen from heaven,
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
You who have weakened the nations!
13 "But you said in your heart,
'I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
14 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.'

The "star of the morning" is a reference to the evil one. Satan fell because he was proud and he desired to be great. He wanted to "ascend to heaven", to raise his throne "above the stars of God" and make himself "like the Most High". He wanted to be exalted, to be compared with and be like God Almighty. Notice the number of times "I will" occurs, showing the arrogant emphasis on the self.

In Ezekiel 28:12, we are told he was created full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. But in verse 17, we are told that his heart was lifted up and his wisdom corrupted because of his arrogance.

Ezekiel 28:12, 17

12 "You had the seal of perfection,
Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
17 "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor.
I cast you to the ground;
I put you before kings,
That they may see you.

The evil one wants to move man in the same direction. He tempts man to seek greatness, stirring up within the heart the spirit of pride and self-exaltation. This happened at the very beginning of the story of man, in the Garden of Eden, and continues throughout the history of man.

Genesis 3:4-6

4 The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die!

5 "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

The evil one drew Eve in the direction of pride and self-exaltation by tempting her to want to be like God, knowing good and evil, to have fleshly aspirations, longing for attainments and positions not intended by God for her. Eve saw that the fruit was good for food, a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise. In disobedience to God, Eve, and then Adam, ate from the fruit of the tree that God had forbidden.

So let us be careful not to strive for greatness in the eyes of the world or in ways that are not according to God's will.

Seek earnestly to grow well

While we should be careful not to strive for greatness in the wrong way, we must not be complacent either. We should not hide under the excuse of wanting to be "least" and thus become slothful and fail to work towards achieving our full potential.

God desires that we earnestly seek to grow well, to be the best that we can be. And by His grace, He will provide what is needful for us to achieve these goals. We must therefore strive to develop to our full potential in Christ, doing so according to His ways, in humility and deep gratitude to God – at the personal level and together in the expression of body-life. It is in such a context that we can be built up in love (Eph. 4) and have deep fellowship with the Lord and with one another. And as we develop and work at our lives in this way, we will move in the direction of true greatness.

I now want to consider with you this question: Why did the Lord Jesus link true greatness with being a servant?

True greatness and being a servant

Let us look at the passage in Mark 10:42-45.

Mark 10:42-45

42 Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them.

43 "But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;

44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.
45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,
and to give His life a ransom for many."

In verse 43, the Lord Jesus linked "become great" with being "your servant", and in verse 44, "to be first among you" with "shall be slave of all". He gave Himself as the example (v. 45).

The Lord also made this link between greatness and being a servant in Matthew 23:11 when He stressed that "the greatest among you shall be your servant". And in John 13, He illustrated the meaning of that link by washing the feet of His disciples.

There are other aspects associated with true greatness, but the Lord Jesus highlighted the link between greatness and the heart of a servant again and again. Why?

By doing so, the Lord Jesus is helping His disciples, in an effective and penetrating manner, to recognise the wrong notions, attitudes and problems associated with the desire to be great. At the same time, He is showing them how these negative features can be resolved, and what the path to true greatness is.

Greatness does involve exaltation – not self-exaltation or exaltation by man but exaltation by God. God Himself is truly great and good, and He is exalted on high. The Lord Jesus wants to impress upon us that to attain true greatness and receive exaltation from God, we must nurture the key qualities of the heart of a servant. These key qualities are significant moral and spiritual qualities in God's kingdom.

Humility

A key quality of the heart of a servant is humility. Humility is the opposite of self-exaltation and pride. It counters and resolves the issues of self-exaltation and pride and is the pathway to true greatness.

The Lord Jesus spoke much about the issues of pride and humility.

Matthew 23:5-7

5 "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.
6 "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,
7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.

In this passage, the Lord told the crowd and His disciples that the Pharisees loved to be recognised by men. They enjoyed being seated at places of honour and being treated with respect. So whatever they did, they did so with the intention of being

noticed by others. These are manifestations of pride. In this context, the Lord taught a very important principle: "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (v. 12).

We see the Lord Jesus illustrating this principle in two parables. In Luke 18:9-14, the Lord told a parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt. He contrasted the attitude of a Pharisee with that of a tax collector.

Luke 18:10-14

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisee exalted himself, and had to be humbled. The tax collector, on the other hand, humbled himself and was by that justified and exalted by the Lord: "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14).

This principle is also illustrated in Luke 14:7-11. The Lord Jesus noticed that at a feast, invited guests were picking out places of honour at the table. So He told them a parable:

Luke 14:7-11

7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them,

8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him,

9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place.

10 "But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you.

11 "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Lord Jesus is not saying that a person will be exalted whenever he chooses the lowliest position. It is the attitude within the person that counts. If the person is truly humble, he will be exalted. But if he exalts himself, he will be humbled. And if he occupies a lowly place because he wishes to be regarded as humble when in fact he is arrogant, God will not exalt him because there is no true humility. In verse 11, the Lord Jesus crystallises the truth He wants to teach us through this parable: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted".

In his epistle, the apostle James reflected much of the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the gospels. In James 4:10, he exhorts: "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you".

Likewise, the apostle Peter was also deeply impressed with this truth, and he instructed:

1 Peter 5:5-6

5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,

So where there is true humility and a true humbling of ourselves in the presence of God, He will exalt us. There will be true exaltation and true greatness.

Perseverance in humble service motivated by love

Another key feature of true greatness is perseverance in humble service motivated by love for others. The Lord Jesus came into this world not to be served, but to serve. Why? It is because of His love for us. Despite the intense agony and suffering, He did not waver, but persevered and gave His life "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The life of the apostle Paul also exemplified true greatness and the heart of a servant. We see this in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Paul voluntarily made himself "a slave to all" because of his love for others. He wanted to "win more" for Christ. He was concerned for the perishing, that they might come to know the Lord and enter God's kingdom. He was willing to endure whatever was necessary to achieve the goal of saving as many as possible.

Paul sought to identify himself with Jews, with Gentiles, with all men. He was willing to be "all things to all men" that he might "by all means save some" and to do "all things for the sake of the gospel". Like the Lord Jesus, he persevered in the mission God entrusted to him, going through many struggles and hardships, and becoming a spectacle to the world, a fool for Christ's sake, being without honour and roughly treated (1 Cor. 4:9-11). Indeed, Paul served with commendable humility and perseverance.

We see evidence of this also in Acts 20, where Paul addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus:

Acts 20:18-24

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them,
"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,

19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

22 "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

24 "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

The elders in Ephesus could see how Paul served the Lord with humility and how in the face of trials and difficulties, he did not shrink from his responsibility. Despite fierce opposition from the Jews and despite knowing that "bonds and afflictions" awaited him in Jerusalem, Paul persevered because of his commitment to the

ministry he received from the Lord, and because of his love and concern for the believers.

Paul's attitude and conduct are manifestations of true greatness. They are opposite to the desire for honour, position, power and exaltation in the sight of men, which are often associated with aspirations for worldly greatness. In Paul's life and attitude, we see an illustration of the heart of a servant the Lord Jesus teaches us in the Gospels.

Importance of nurturing the heart of a true servant

The problems associated with wanting to be great can be countered and resolved in a meaningful and beautiful way when we nurture the heart of a true servant.

In Galatians 5:13, Paul exhorts believers to have the heart of a true servant:

Galatians 5:13

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

The heart of a true servant is one that serves others through love. Christ has given us true freedom, freeing us from the law of sin and death. We are to use this freedom to serve one another in love and humility. This is the basic approach to life that we should take. One who lives in this way manifests true greatness.

Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of a negative competitive spirit

One who desires to be great often desires to be looked up to, to be admired and respected. More than that, he desires to be compared favourably with others – to be better, more admired and more respected. But the Lord Jesus teaches us that the one who is great is the one who is "least among you", and He illustrates this concept of greatness using the attitude of a servant. A servant is regarded as lower than others. So when we have the attitude of a servant, and are prepared to be regarded as lower than others, we will not have the negative competitive spirit often seen in those who have wrongful desires for greatness.

Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of the desire to exercise authority over others

One who seeks greatness often also has the desire to lord it over or exercise authority over others. When we have the heart of a servant, we will not seek to lord it over others, but will seek to serve them instead.

Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of self-centredness and self-indulgence

Self-centredness is often the force that drives the desire for greatness. We seek authority and recognition so we can gratify and indulge in our own desires. But when we have the heart of a servant, we seek to serve others out of love for them. Instead of self-centredness and preoccupation with our self-interests, we will look out for the interests of others.

It is therefore important that we nurture the heart of a true servant and effectively put away all the problems associated with wrongful desires for greatness.

Concluding remarks

In Act 2, Scene 5, of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, there is this statement: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them". Do you agree with this statement?

A person born of a king or ruler may be "born great". Some may achieve greatness through hard work or improper ways. Some may have greatness "thrust upon" them because of circumstances. But all such greatness is temporal.

True greatness cannot be obtained through birth, worldly achievements, or by having it thrust upon us. True greatness has to do with our moral and spiritual stature in the kingdom of God. To attain true greatness and to achieve that which is of value in the kingdom of God, we will need to develop our moral and spiritual qualities and deepen our walk with God. Let us be earnest and prayerful in doing so.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What is the pathway to attaining true greatness?
2. What can we learn from Satan's fall and the way he tempted Eve in this area of greatness (Isa. 14:12-14, Ezek. 28:12-17, Gen. 3:1-6)?
3. The Lord Jesus often links true greatness to being a servant. What is He seeking to teach us by doing so?
4. How are the problems associated with wanting to be great countered and resolved in a meaningful and beautiful way when we nurture the heart of a true servant?

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