

Message: AR152
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: The Lord Jesus Christ
Subsection: Greatness
Date preached: 25 Dec 94
Date edited: 13 Dec 14 (Revised Aug 16)

WHO IS TRULY GREAT?

The desire to be great is a major aspiration of man. This is true of people all over the world and throughout the history of mankind. It is also a major problem area that is aggravated by popular notions of greatness and wrongful desires in the hearts of men.

Some seek greatness in spectacular ways. We have heard of people like Alexander the Great who conquered nations and built a vast empire, and Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion who famously declared: "I'm the greatest." For many of us, it might simply be a desire to be a great doctor, artist, musician, athlete or cook.

This desire to be great motivates people to work very hard and some to even resort to improper means to make sure they attain greatness in society. Such a desire is not confined to unbelievers. It exists in believers as well. For example, we are told in Luke 9:46 that the disciples of the Lord Jesus argued among themselves as to which of them might be the greatest.

Why do people want to be great? It is often because they desire to be famous, and to be recognised and honoured. The desire to be great is usually associated with a desire for power and authority, success and accomplishment. When people have attained any or all of these, they feel they "have arrived" and have achieved status in society, and others look up to them.

It is not only the individual who aspires to greatness. Often, those close to him, especially his parents and spouse, also want him to be great. Many of them are prepared to work very hard and use all means to help him attain greatness. But is it a commendable thing to be great? And what does it mean to be truly great? These are the issues we will consider in this and subsequent messages.

The world's concept of greatness

We shall first look at two persons in the Old Testament who illustrate the world's idea of greatness.

King Solomon

It is generally agreed that King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, he wrote:

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

1 I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility.

2 I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"

3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself;

5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees;

6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves and I had home born slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.

8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

9 Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.

10 All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Solomon had immeasurable wealth. He had houses, huge estates, vineyards and fruit trees, many slaves, large herds and flocks. He amassed immense amounts of silver, gold and "the treasure of kings and provinces". He had many concubines and indulged in all kinds of pleasures. In that context he said: "I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem" (v. 9).

Yes, Solomon became great. He had wealth, he had fame, and he enjoyed prestige and power. But his greatness is not true greatness. It is greatness in the eyes of the world, but not greatness in the eyes of God.

The picture that Solomon painted of himself and his pursuits is a very vivid description of gross self-indulgence, pleasure-seeking and self-centredness. We see a constant repetition of "for myself" in this passage. In everything that he sought to possess, he did it for himself, for his own pleasure.

Yet, he acknowledged that in spite of his immense riches, all he had laboured to achieve was vanity and striving after wind. There was a sense of emptiness and futility. What he had attained and achieved had no lasting value and did not give him a sense of true fulfilment.

King Nebuchadnezzar

Like King Solomon, King Nebuchadnezzar was considered great in the temporal and visible realm. He was king over the most powerful empire in that region at that time. In two passages, Daniel described the power that Nebuchadnezzar had:

Daniel 4:22

it is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth.

Daniel 5:18-19

18 "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father.

19 "Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled."

King Nebuchadnezzar had sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty. He had tremendous power – he could command the death or otherwise of whomever he pleased. All the nations and peoples feared him. However, what he had was only earthly sovereignty, grandeur, glory, majesty and power.

What was Nebuchadnezzar's true state in the eyes of God? Daniel 5:20 tells us "his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly". His arrogance incurred the wrath and judgement of God. So although Nebuchadnezzar had all the glory and splendour of the world, he was, in reality, in a pathetic state, and his attitude was found wanting. Under God's judgement, his earthly kingdom and glory were taken away.

Daniel had earlier interpreted one of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams which warned of God's impending judgement. Daniel advised the king to break away from his iniquities. In spite of the warning, the king did not change. At the height of his majesty and power, while still basking in his glory, God's judgement came upon him.

Daniel 4:28-33

28 "All this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king.

29 "Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon.

30 "The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'

31 "While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you,

32 and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.'

33 "Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.

The king was driven away to live like an animal among the animals. He fed on grass, his body was drenched with dew, his hair grew like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws. What a pathetic state for a powerful king to be reduced to!

Before judgement came, the king had the outward appearance of splendour and power. Even though his true state was pathetic, it was not obvious. But when judgement came upon him, his pathetic state became obvious to all, and it was a picture of his true state.

Like King Solomon and King Nebuchadnezzar, many who are regarded as great in society may in reality be in a poor state. Outwardly, there is the facade of splendour and glory, but in their hearts, there is pride and arrogance, corruption and turmoil. Though they dress in fine clothes and flaunt their wealth, and though they revel in their fame and status in society, their lives are devoid of true meaning and purpose, and a sense of emptiness and futility lurks within.

Let us now consider the One who is truly great.

True greatness – the Lord Jesus and His teaching

The Lord Jesus is without doubt the greatest. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, and all things came into being through Him. His kingdom is the only one that will endure forever.

Luke 1:32-33

32 "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of greatness. Yet His life, His attitudes and His teaching are starkly different from the world's notions and expectations of greatness. Although He is the Son of God and the great Saviour of mankind, His earthly circumstances were anything but what would usually be associated with greatness. He was born in a stable and laid in a humble manger. His parents were poor, and even while He was just a child, they had to flee from King Herod who was after His life. Even in adult life, He had nowhere to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). All these have implications for our understanding of the meaning of true greatness. Many regard the Lord Jesus as a great man, but they neither know what He stands for nor His teaching on true greatness.

Heart of a servant

Through His life and teaching, the Lord Jesus sought to correct wrong notions of greatness and unhealthy desires for greatness. But it is not always easy to understand His teaching or the way He lived His life. Even His disciples found it difficult at times. This can be seen on one occasion recorded in John 13.

John 13:1, 3, 4

1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God,

4 got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.

John 13:8

Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

There were important things that the Lord Jesus wanted to communicate to His disciples before His departure from this earth. When the time for Him to be crucified was approaching, one of the things He did was to wash the feet of His disciples. Peter protested. Why? It was not because he was rebellious or disrespectful, or just wanted to be different, but because he recognised Jesus as the great Lord, and he could not imagine the Lord washing his feet. That would be a task done by servants!

Peter's concept of greatness reflected the common understanding that greatness involves exercising power and authority over others. Thus the great should not serve, but be served.

Teaching by example

But the Lord Jesus was seeking to teach His disciples an important truth – that true greatness involves the *heart of a servant* and *true humility*. And so He vividly

illustrated that truth by the act of feet-washing. This would serve as a practical example – and one that would be impressed deeply upon the hearts of His disciples for years to come.

John 13:12-17

12 So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

13 "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.

14 "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

15 "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

16 "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.

17 "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus was their Lord and Teacher. Even though it did not seem proper to them, there was deep meaning in what He did. He wanted them to observe, learn from and follow His example.

A slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. The Lord, their master, washed their feet. How much more must the disciples be willing to do as He did! It was not the outward act that they were to follow, but the meaning behind that act. It was humility and the heart of a servant in true service that the Lord wanted them to appreciate and to develop.

The Lord Jesus intended that His disciples should have the same attitude as His and express it in their lives: "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (v. 15). Knowing these things, they would be blessed if they did them.

Different from worldly ideas and expressions of greatness

The Lord Jesus sought to teach this area of truth to His disciples on several occasions. In Mark 10:42-45, the Lord explained to them that worldly expressions of greatness are often associated with exercising authority and lording over others.

Mark 10:42-44

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.

The rulers of the Gentiles and their great men enjoy exercising authority and lording over others. But the Lord reminded the disciples that it was not to be so with them,

for it is different in the kingdom of God. True greatness is when we have the heart of a servant. It is when we become a slave of all that we are first.

The Lord Jesus then pointed to Himself as an example.

Mark 10:45

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The Son of God came with the spirit of serving others – to the ultimate degree. He referred to the Cross, where He would lay down His life as a ransom for many.

Aspirations to greatness in God's kingdom

Let us look at the context of Mark 10.

Mark 10:35-41

35 James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.”

36 And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

37 They said to Him, “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory.”

38 But 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?”

39 They said to Him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.

40 “But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

41 Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

James and John aspired to greatness and glory in the kingdom of God. They asked for positions of honour – to sit on the right and the left of the Lord Jesus in His glory. The other disciples were indignant with them. In that context, the Lord Jesus explained to them the right and wrong concepts of greatness.

James and John were not seeking worldly greatness. They wanted greatness in God's kingdom. Was that wrong?

Notice that the Lord neither disparaged the notion of greatness nor discouraged their aspirations to be great. What He wanted to impress upon them was that they should be like their master, and that they should appreciate the true meaning of greatness in the kingdom of God and the way to attain true greatness.

Beware of the pitfalls of aspiring to greatness

The very entertaining of the desire to be great, even in the kingdom of God, is fraught with dangers. The problem lies with the heart of man. The longings to be great are very often tainted with wrong attitudes, especially the spirit of pride and the desire to be in a position of status, power and authority. As we live in this world, the spirit of the world exerts a great influence over us.

Even when we strive to have the heart of a servant, we may be motivated by an unhealthy desire for recognition and an unhealthy competitive spirit to be the greatest of all. We may think and project the idea that we are more humble, or are better at expressing the life of a servant, than other believers.

The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. So, to be truly free from all improper longings, and from the wrong way we see things and approach issues of life, we need to be thoroughly renewed in our mind and spirit.

Concluding remarks

Many of the problems of the world – strife, jealousy, envy, scheming and bloodshed – can be traced to man’s aspiration to be great. These problems exist even among God’s people and in relation to His work.

The world’s idea of greatness involves high status, a sense of authority over others and being able to get what you want. Yet the lives of King Solomon and King Nebuchadnezzar were empty and futile. Instead, as we reflected on the person, life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who is truly great, we see that true greatness is not manifested in lording over others, but in having a heart of humility and service. Ultimately, God is not against the notion of greatness but wants us to recognise clearly that greatness in the kingdom of God is fundamentally different from that in the world.

Having a wrong concept of greatness is a serious matter and a significant hindrance to God's work. It facilitates the work and schemes of the evil one and his opposition to the advancement of God's kingdom. It is therefore important that we have a good grasp of the biblical concept of true greatness and seek to attain to true greatness in our lives. We will dwell more on this in the next message.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Why do people long for and strive hard after greatness? What is the world’s concept of greatness? What can we learn from the experiences of King Solomon

(Eccles. 2:1-11) and King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4-5) in the area of greatness? Were these two kings truly great?

2. What can we learn from the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ on the meaning of true greatness? How did the Lord Jesus go about correcting wrong notions of greatness and unhealthy desires for greatness? (John 13:1-17; Mark 10:35-45)
3. What is the difference between the world's idea of greatness and true greatness?
4. Is it wrong to aspire for greatness in God's kingdom? What are the pitfalls?

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