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LEARNING FROM THE LORD JESUS CHRIST – OUR PERFECT EXAMPLE OF TRUE GREATNESS

In this final message, we will continue to consider the biblical presentation of the meaning of true greatness, especially as exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, our perfect example.

We have seen that God does not want us to pursue worldly greatness. Yet, He may put some of us in positions of earthly honour. There are biblical examples like Daniel, Joseph and David.

Daniel walked faithfully with God and was highly esteemed by Him. He did not seek earthly positions, but rose to a very high position in Babylon. Joseph was made a ruler over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He had power, fame and prestige. David was made king of Israel on the instructions of the Lord.

These men were in their earthly positions as part of their faithful walk with God. They neither strove for nor clung on to such positions.

What about us in our context today? We may not achieve such positions as king or governor but we may be great in our fields or professions – a great engineer, a renowned surgeon, an eminent scientist. It is not wrong to be recognised in this way, but it is important that it comes about because God sees it fit as part of our walk with Him.

It is common to think that when we are great in some way, we can have a sense of fulfilment and success. But this sense of fulfilment and success is only temporal. When we attain earthly status, even if it is as part of our faithful walk with God, we must be prayerful and vigilant. Otherwise, we can be easily caught up with the prestige and fame it brings, enjoying the recognition, the praises of men, and the status associated with it. We may then cling to them and become proud, and thus our spirit is adversely affected by the success we have achieved.

The important question for us to ask is whether we are, from a Christian perspective, good doctors, scientists, engineers, teachers. In the eyes of the Lord, are we responsible and do we work with good attitudes and a positive spirit?

Yes, true greatness is good and desirable. But, as we have seen, it is not so helpful to concentrate on pursuing greatness directly as this tends to develop within us negative traits like pride, self-exaltation and a negative competitive spirit. It is more

helpful that we concentrate on developing the qualities of our heart that are important to God. As Christ is our Lord and perfect example, we should seek to know Him more deeply and learn to be more like Him in character and attitude.

Jesus, the suffering Servant

When we think of the Lord Jesus, what kind of ideas come to our mind? We may think of Him as the King of kings and as One having immeasurable authority. But one prominent biblical description of the Lord Jesus is "Servant". The Lord Jesus exemplified the heart of a servant and taught His disciples to likewise have the heart of a servant – to serve God and others in a spirit of love, humility and perseverance. In John 13, the Lord Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and exhorted them to follow His example. In Mark 10:45, He said: "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 suffering Servant in Isaiah

A prominent characteristic of the coming Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament is that of the Messiah as the suffering Servant. There are several prophetic passages of the coming Messiah in Isaiah commonly known as "The Servant Songs". I will refer to only one of them: Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This is one of the most significant prophetic passages in the Scriptures on the coming Messiah and it paints a picture of Him as a suffering Servant:

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

"My servant" here refers to the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Servant will prosper and be greatly exalted. We see here the unexpected but biblical notion of the connection between servant and exaltation. Generally, our concept of "servant" is someone who is lowly. But here is a Servant who is greatly exalted – One who is truly great.

However, Isaiah went on to prophesy in vivid terms the Messiah as a suffering Servant, together with many features which are contrary to worldly concepts of greatness.

Isaiah 52:14

Just as many were astonished at you, My people,
So His appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men.

Isaiah 53:2-5

2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;

He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

3 He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.

This Servant had no stately appearance that would draw man's notice and regard. He was, instead, despised and forsaken. He was pierced through, crushed and scourged. He suffered indescribable pain for our transgressions so that we might be healed.

Isaiah 53:6-9

6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?

9 His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

Isaiah 53:11-12

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,

And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.

In His service for God and man, this Servant would suffer immensely. He would be oppressed and afflicted and would suffer anguish of soul. He would be treated like a criminal and crucified with criminals. But God will allot Him "a portion with the great" because He was willing to suffer for the sake of others. He will be truly great in the eyes of God. His greatness is demonstrated in His strength of character, His unflinching determination to do God's will, and His perseverance in the face of indescribable agony and suffering as He bore the sins of men and interceded for the transgressors.

True greatness and servanthood: Philippians 2:3-11

Let us look at another important passage in the Scriptures concerning the Lord Jesus – this time from the New Testament – that illustrates the meaning of true greatness and the way to attain it. This passage has a prominent theme: servanthood. It highlights again the relationship between true greatness and the heart of a servant and emphasises the spiritual reality that the truly humble will be exalted. This passage powerfully depicts the Lord Jesus living out His teaching on greatness and the heart of a servant.

Philippians 2:3-11

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

There is controversy over this passage with regard to the meaning of "emptied Himself" (v. 7). An interpretation put forward is that when the Lord Jesus was on

earth, He “emptied Himself” in the sense that He divested Himself of His divine attributes – that is, He became man, and was no longer God. This is known as the Kenotic theory. There are variations to this line of interpretation. But this idea of the Lord Jesus divesting Himself of His divine attributes when He came to earth is a serious error. The Lord Jesus on earth was the God-Man, not just merely man.

The Scriptures teaches us that the Lord Jesus is “Immanuel” which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). That is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ during His time on earth. The Word became flesh without ceasing to be God. When He was on earth, He had authority to forgive sins. If He had been just man, He would not have been able to do that. A mere man cannot forgive sins (Mark 2:5-11).

This area of truth has important implications with regard to the meaning and significance of His life and ministry on earth, and more importantly, with regard to His death. It is the God-Man alone who can bear our sins on the Cross and pay the price for all mankind.

The Lord Jesus existed in the form of God, but He humbled Himself by taking the form of a bondservant and served in obedience to the will of God the Father. For this, God the Father highly exalted Him.

Features of true greatness in Philippians 2

This passage in Philippians 2 helps us to appreciate various features of true greatness exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus, including features mentioned in the previous messages.

1. Right attitude

In verse 5, we are told to “have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus”. Let us realise that the right attitude is essential. Indeed it is at the very heart of true greatness. Outward conduct, expressions and achievements, no matter how great in the eyes of man, will not count as true greatness if the right attitude is absent.

2. Servanthood

In verses 6 to 8, we are told that the Lord Jesus, although He existed in the form of God, took the form of a “bondservant”, and He was obedient to the point of death on the Cross. Here, we see the link between true greatness and being a servant.

3. Humility

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord “humbled Himself”. In verse 3, Paul instructs believers to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind ...” The attitude Paul commends is humility. He describes conceit as “empty” or futile.

There cannot be true greatness in the eyes of the Lord without genuine humility. Pride being the antithesis of true greatness, its presence will erode the reality of

greatness within us. However, it does not mean there must be no tinge of pride in us at all for God to appreciate us. At different levels of our development, we will have different degrees of humility. But to the degree pride is present in us, to that degree true greatness will be diminished.

So, if we want to progress well in the direction of God's calling, we will have to deal decisively with pride in whatever form it exists and learn to nurture humility to the highest degree.

4. No selfishness or contentiousness

Verse 3 exhorts us to "do nothing from selfishness" (or "contentiousness": margin of NASB). In the original text, this word can also be translated as "rivalry". The spirit of rivalry, often seen in those who desire to be great, drives them in the very opposite direction of true greatness.

Instead of acting from selfishness, Paul exhorts us to look out for the interests of others (v. 4), to consider them as more important than ourselves (v. 3). Instead of harbouring a sense of self-importance, we are to be concerned for the welfare of others and be considerate towards them, and have proper regard and respect for them. This is to be translated into service motivated by a heart of love.

We are exhorted to have the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who came as a "bondservant" of God for our welfare. His death was for us. He suffered untold agony when He paid the penalty for our sins. In this, we see the exact opposite of selfishness and contentiousness. This is love at the highest, purest level. Such marvellous love — who can fully appreciate it! May the Lord fill our hearts with His divine love so that we may learn to also serve with such self-giving love.

5. Sacrifice

Verse 7 tells us the Lord "emptied Himself". He gave up His glorious position and circumstances with the Father in heaven and came into a fallen, sin-filled world as a bondservant. For the sake of man, He suffered ill-treatment, humiliation and crucifixion.

It is not easy to give up a comfortable context and a position of great honour and willingly be subjected to great humiliation and suffering. It would seem unfair for one to be put in difficult circumstances just to help others. But at the heart of true service is the love for God and man that moves us to willingly give up whatever we hold dear and go through whatever God sees fit for us to go through.

As we reflect on the sacrificial life of the Lord Jesus, we will appreciate better what He meant when He taught His disciples that to become great, one ought to be a servant and slave of all.

6. Perseverance

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord was obedient "to the point of death, even death on a cross". His earthly life of service was one of suffering, culminating at the Cross, where He suffered intense agony as He bore the punishment due to all mankind.

True greatness requires service not just with a heart of love and humility, but also with the quality of perseverance. The degree of greatness is related to the extent to which we are willing to go in the path of true service. The Lord Jesus was willing to serve to the point of death on the Cross. That is a reflection of the greatness of the Lord Jesus and the quality of the service He rendered. He was prepared to pay the ultimate price, and He did.

To some extent, we may have the heart of a servant. But how deep is the quality? How far are we prepared to go to be obedient to God, to make sacrifices, to persevere in spite of great odds, humiliation, excruciating pain, anguish and severe afflictions from the evil one?

The real qualities of the Christian faith are deep, strong qualities of character and spirit. They are never superficial or primarily emotional. We may feel a surge of love so strong that we feel we are prepared to go through all odds to serve. But if it is primarily emotional, then it is not an indication of real quality of faith. The test is whether we waver and shrink back when the going gets tough.

It is important that we nurture good character with deep quality of love and humility with perseverance. This is not possible on our own; only God can bring it about in our lives as we let Him fill our hearts with divine love and as we learn to walk according to the Spirit. We can then face the trials of life with true confidence in the Lord, knowing that His grace is sufficient for us and that He will lead us in triumph in Christ. The trials we go through can help us see to what degree we have developed the positive qualities of the inner man. And if we go through the trials well, the qualities will deepen.

7. Obedience to God

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord Jesus humbled Himself by "becoming obedient" to the Father. Obedience to God the Father is an essential element of true greatness. There is true greatness in service only when the service is expressed in the context of obedience to the Lord. We may try very hard to serve others in love, humility and perseverance, but if it is not in obedience to the Father, it is not in the truth. Whatever we do that is not in fellowship with the Lord is not true service; it is not an expression of true greatness. True service cannot be according to our own thinking and inclinations, or in response to the expectation of others; nor can it be dictated by circumstances. It has to be according to the truth and to what the Lord requires of us.

8. Exaltation is from God

Verse 9 tells us that "God highly exalted Him". True greatness and exaltation is of the Lord, not of man. Man may accord us prestige and power, but if God does not appreciate us, there is no true greatness. However, there can be true greatness even if man does not recognise it.

Appreciation of the greatness of the God-Man

May the Lord help us appreciate the greatness of the Lord Jesus and all that He went through on our behalf. Because of His love for us, He left His glorious position and existence in heaven and came into this fallen world. To identify with us and to die for us, He humbled Himself and became man – even a bondservant. Yet He did not cease to be God. All that He went through, including the pain, humiliation and mockery at the Cross, He experienced them all both as God and as man.

Let us reflect on how much the Lord Jesus, as God, was prepared to go through on our behalf. Let us also reflect on Him, as the perfect man, whose life is a perfect example of true greatness. Let us learn from Him how we too can move in the direction of true greatness.

Qualifications on the meaning of being a servant

There can be misconceptions with regards to what it means to be a servant as an expression of true greatness. The following qualifications may help to clarify two common misconceptions on this subject.

1. Heart of a servant does not mean submitting to whatever others expect of us

Having the heart of a servant does not mean that we must literally become servants or slaves of other people. It does not mean we have to submit to them in whatever they require or expect of us. If we fail to understand how this area of truth ought to work out, we can become unduly disturbed and frustrated. We may not know how to respond to unreasonable demands and expectations of others, including those who try to take advantage of us. We may even conclude that the Christian faith is not practical and cannot be lived out in this fallen world.

When the Lord Jesus spoke about being a bondservant or slave of all, He is referring to having the heart of a servant in the context of submission to God. God is the only Lord and Master whom we should serve with full obedience. We owe absolute submission only to Him. And in submission to the will of God, we serve others humbly, in love and truth, in sincerity, for their welfare.

Example of Paul

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, the apostle Paul expressed how he was prepared to identify himself with the Jews, with the weak, and with both those who were under the Law and those not under the Law. He made himself a "slave to all" so he might win them to Christ. He said: "I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means

save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel ..." (vs. 22-23). But Paul lived in this way always in the context of "not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ" (v. 21).

Paul was prepared to do all he could to reach out to others for their eternal well-being, but without violating "the law of Christ". True service is always within the framework of the truths and principles God has revealed in the Scriptures, and according to God's will and guidance in specific situations.

Example of the Lord Jesus

The Lord Jesus Christ declared that He came to serve and He did, laying down His life as a ransom for many. But, quite clearly, He did not allow anyone to simply order Him around. Nor would He satisfy all the demands and expectations of others.

Let us look at His response to Herod in Luke 23:6-9:

Luke 23:6-9

6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

7 And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time.

8 Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.

9 And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing.

Herod questioned the Lord Jesus with the hope of seeing Him perform some sign. But the Lord did not oblige him with any.

The Lord Jesus knew that His teaching and His ways would, from time to time, arouse the antagonism of the religious leaders. He came to serve, but He did not try to appease them by refraining from saying or doing anything that might arouse their hostility. Instead, He continued to do what was required of Him by the Father.

Likewise, when the multitude wanted to make Him king, the Lord Jesus did not accede to their desire because it was not God's will for Him to do so (John 6:15).

2. Heart of a servant does not mean having no authority

Having the heart of a servant does not mean the believer has no authority and cannot properly exercise authority over others. It may sound paradoxical – the authority of the slave of all – but having the heart of a servant is compatible with exercising authority.

The Lord Jesus took the form of a bondservant, yet He had great authority and He spoke with authority. The apostles and the elders of the churches were given spiritual authority. In Titus 2:15, Paul instructed Titus:

Titus 2:15

These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

True authority can be exercised by those with the heart of a servant. But this authority must be from the Lord, and it is for building up and not for tearing down. Paul spoke of the authority given him in 2 Corinthians 13:10:

2 Corinthians 13:10

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down.

Such authority is different from that which lord it over others. It is given by God so that His people may be built up in their faith.

Beyond the spiritual authority which the Lord entrusts to those with specific roles and responsibilities, such as the apostles and elders, for the advancement of His kingdom, there is also the spiritual authority that God's children may manifest generally.

When there is a true heart of servanthood and the attaining of true greatness in God's kingdom, God's children can manifest true spiritual authority in the spiritual realm. This spiritual authority may be manifested in different contexts, including confronting and overcoming the forces of darkness, and in effective prayer that contributes to the advancement of God's kingdom. It can also be manifested in various forms of ministry, such as in preaching, teaching and communication of the truth. The significance of the spiritual impact of their lives and ministry bears a relationship with the degree of true greatness attained.

Concluding remarks

There are believers who profess eagerness to serve God but are not eager to serve others, especially if their service goes unnoticed, or is difficult or unglamorous. If this is true of us, then we are deficient in this important quality of the heart of a servant.

When the Lord Jesus exhorted every disciple of His to be a servant or slave of all, He is encouraging a servant's heart that is prepared to serve others. When we serve others with a true heart of love, we are in fact serving the Lord.

So in our expression of love for the Lord and all that He has done for us, we must be willing to serve others according to God's will – humbly, consistently, with perseverance and for their edification.

Two verses from Matthew can help us appreciate how to look at acts of service that may seem insignificant.

The Lord Jesus tells us how He will judge as the Son of Man when He comes, and when He sits on His glorious throne.

Matthew 25:40

“The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

Service rendered even to “the least” of “these brothers” of the Lord Jesus is considered by the Lord to be service to Him.

Matthew 10:42

“And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Giving a cup of cold water may seem a simple insignificant act of service. But the Lord says that a person who does even such an act in the name of a disciple shall not lose his reward. True service in a spirit of humility is deeply appreciated by the Lord.

What we can appreciate from these two verses is that we should not neglect to do good, even if it appears to be insignificant in men's eyes. We should not think that only doing “big” things or serving important people counts for God. What appears great may not be great in the eyes of God and conversely, what appears little may be of great value to Him. The commendation by the Lord of the poor widow who contributed just two copper coins is a good illustration and reminder of this principle (Mark 12:41-44).

Let us learn to perceive things from the perspective of God and His kingdom and learn to serve humbly in love in all situations, whether our service appears significant or not. Our service should not hinge on how others may regard us. Let us concentrate on developing good character and positive attitudes, not just for the moment, but for our whole life. It is indeed feasible for every child of God to be truly great in God's kingdom.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How should we view and approach the issue of positions of status, honour and authority in this world? What do you think God is looking for in the way His children go about fulfilling their responsibilities in their work and professions?
2. What can we learn about true greatness from the prophetic passage in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 on the coming Messiah as the suffering Servant?
3. How does the passage in Philippians 2:3-11 help us to appreciate various features of true greatness as exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ?
4. Having the heart of a servant is an integral part of true greatness. Does this mean:
 - One should submit to whatever others expect of us
 - It is improper for believers to exercise authority over others or to manifest authority in their lives?
5. Reflect over whether you are truly prepared to devote your life to serve the Lord and others with the heart of a servant - humbly, consistently, with perseverance - to the glory of God and the well-being of others.

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