

INTRODUCTION

When I was a pastor in Alabama, we lived next to a cemetery. Most days I would jog through there; the residents never complained. I enjoyed reading the tombstones. I'll never forget the short tribute one on large tombstone. A man's name was listed and then it said, "He was a great man." I often wondered what criteria did they use to determine that this was a great man?

The word "great" is probably the most overused word in the English language. When you Google the word great there are 5.5 billion links. And we not only have great, we have greater, and greatest!

There were three restaurants on one city block. The first restaurant had a large sign that said, "The Greatest Restaurant in the city." The second restaurant had a larger sign that said, "The Greatest Restaurant in the county." The third restaurant had a small sign that simply said, "The Greatest Restaurant on this block."

But the word "great" can also mean just the opposite. If you get in your car to crank it up and the battery's dead you might say, "Well, that's just great!" No wonder it's hard to learn English!

I'm going to talk about greatness today, and I want to illustrate greatness the same way Jesus did. I have asked my granddaughter, Caroline/Lizzie to help me out today. Why don't you come up here and jump in my arms? Let me ask you a couple of questions. How old are you? Why do you like coming to church? Do you know that I love you? I love you very much. Okay, see you at lunch. Bye! When Jesus' disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus did exactly what I just did.

Mark 9:33-37. "They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.' 'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.' 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.'"

In 2001, Jim Collins wrote a bestselling management book entitled *Good to Great*. The subtitle was "Why some Companies take the leap and others don't." Collins studied a number of successful companies like Nucor and Walgreens and presented management principles on how to take a good company and make it great.

I enjoyed reading the book and we applied some of the principles here at Green Acres, like staffing with excellence. Jim Collins talks about how it's important to get the right employees on the bus, then you can find the right seat for them later.

These are great principles for business, but when it comes to personal greatness, Jesus turned the pyramid upside down. I've entitled this message From Great to Good. I don't think a business book with that title would sell many copies. But when it comes to our personal relationship with God and with others, Jesus taught that personal goodness is more valuable than personal greatness. Let's unpack this truth by exploring three principles from this episode.

I. WE MUST RESIST THE TEMPTATION OF SELFISH PRIDE

We read that, "On the way they had argued about who was the greatest." Just hours earlier Jesus had revealed Himself in all of His glory to Peter, James, and John. Then He had performed the miracle of delivering the young man who was tortured by a demon. As they were walking back Jesus was talking about how He would be delivered, betrayed, tortured, and killed in Jerusalem, then He would rise from the dead. Those are deep, important topics. But instead of discussing these great events, the disciples were arguing about which one of them were the greatest. When Jesus asked them what they were talking about, I don't blame them for keeping quiet. They were embarrassed.

But Jesus is omniscient—He knows all things—so He knew exactly what they were arguing about: Who was the greatest. We all have to deal with the temptation of our flesh to think we are great. We have an "I" problem, and it has nothing to do with sight. I'm talking about the big "I" that represents your ego. It wants to be great. I can remember boxer Muhammad Ali brashly declaring, "I am the greatest!!"

We say so many things are "great" that the word has lost its power. We talk about the Great Lakes, Great Britain, the Great Plains, the Great Wall in China; and the Great White Shark swimming in the Great Barrier Reef. And history has dubbed certain leaders with the title "great." You've probably heard of Alexander the Great, Herod the Great, and even Catherine the Great. Wikipedia reports there has been at least 114 world leaders who had the word "great" used with their names, all the way from Albert the Great to Xerxes the Great.

The essence of sin is self-centeredness. And a person who suffers from selfish pride places their ego at the center of their own personal universe and everything and everyone revolves around them. They don't know much about theology, but their favorite topic is Me-ology. They love to talk about "me" and what "me" likes or "me" doesn't like. And drumroll please; now we have the ability to take pictures of our favorite subject—me!! According to a CBS report, we are taking 93 million selfies a day.

The Bible teaches that we must resist this temptation for self-promotion. The Bible says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3)

There's nothing wrong with having ambition—ambition for your family, your church, or your business can be a good thing. The Bible warns about the kind of SELFISH ambition that causes you to consider yourself better than everyone else.

In His book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins points out a surprising discovery. The leaders of these great companies were actually humble men and women. He wrote: "The best CEOs in our research display tremendous ambition for their company. Yet at the same time they display a remarkable humility about themselves, ascribing much of their own success to luck, discipline and preparation rather than personal genius."

Dr. Jim Henry served as Pastor of FBC Orlando for almost thirty years before he retired in 2009. He has been a friend and mentor of mine for many years. He is a great guy. He is a genuinely humble servant of God. He tells the story on himself about the time when he was attending a graduation ceremony in the football stadium at his alma mater, Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky. He was receiving the outstanding alumnus award. He was sitting up on the platform with the president and the faculty in his dark robe. And for a few minutes he was feeling pretty good about himself. Just before he got up to get the award he was thinking, "When I was a student here, I was a nobody. Nobody expected me to succeed. Nobody knew that I would be the pastor of one of the largest churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. But here I am. Getting the outstanding alumnus award. Not bad, Jim, old boy." Then Jim said, just as he walked to the podium to get the award, he said a large bird flew over him and bombed him from his head down the shoulder of his black robe. He started laughing and everyone else started laughing. And Jim was thinking, "God sure has a sense of humor. And He has a way of humbling us when we start thinking too highly of ourselves!"

II. IN GOD'S KINGDOM SERVICE IS BETTER THAN STATUS

Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

In this world, everyone is trying to make it to the top. They want to get to the top of the corporate ladder, or the top of the heap, or the top of the list of richest people.

But God's kingdom is a reverse kingdom. In God's kingdom, the way up is down and way down is up. The Bible says in James 4:6, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Then a few verses later in James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up."

The way down is up and the way up is down in God's kingdom. In Isaiah 14 we read about the selfish ambition of an angel named Lucifer. He said, "I will ascend to heaven; I will place my throne above the stars of heaven...I will make myself like the most high!" (Isaiah 14:13-14) Satan said, "I'm going up, up, up. The sky's not even the limit for me!" But God said, "No way. You're going down, down, down." And Satan has been going down since that day, and one day he'll go all the way down to the bottomless pit. Because in God's kingdom. The way up is down and the way down is up.

Jesus demonstrated a servant's heart when He washed the disciples' feet the night before He was crucified. They all thought they were too important to wash feet, but Jesus showed them what servanthood is all about. He was the Son of God, but He didn't lead with a fancy title, He lead with a foot towel.

Here's a point for you to consider: In God's eyes, greatness isn't determined by how many servants you have; but by how many people you serve.

I can remember when I was a kid going to R.A.s at my home church. We had our meeting, and then went out to play baseball, basketball, or football depending on the season. Then when the game was over all the guys would run as fast as we could to line up at the soft drink machine to get our free coke. There was pushing and shoving to get to the front of the line. There were even a few pushes and punches thrown as everyone fought to be toward the front of the line. I look back on that and realize that's the attitude of the world today: Push to the front of the line. Me first! But in the kingdom of God, the attitude is, "Please, after you." In God's kingdom, service is better than status.

III. A CHILD IS JESUS' PATTERN FOR HUMILITY

When Jesus was looking for an object lesson about true greatness, "He took a little child and had him stand among them."

As Jesus got ready to talk about greatness, I suspect Simon Peter was getting ready to stand up to be the perfect example of the greatest disciple. But instead, Jesus took a little child and held him in His arms. We know Jesus loves children and He welcomes them into His arms.

In the parallel passage in Matthew we read, "He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 18:2-4)

Jesus didn't just use a child as an example of humility; He told the disciples they had to change and become like little children if they ever wanted to enter the Kingdom. That is a revolutionary statement. In one respect, God only has kids in His kingdom. If we're going to become like children again, we've got to understand how a child thinks.

Now, Jesus didn't say we must become childish; there are some negative qualities of kids we should avoid. He said we must become *childlike*. Since we've all been a kid at one time in our lives, these aren't NEW qualities we have to learn. They are simply things we need to relearn, or just don't ever stop doing. I'd like to remind you of three positive childlike qualities we should keep on expressing.

A. Kids in the Kingdom have UNRESTRAINED JOY

You saw how happy Lizzie and Caroline were when they were in my arms. Don't you love to hear children laugh? A couple of weeks ago when Lizzie was baptized, Jason's parents and his

twin brother Robert and his kids came to visit. Robert's wife is Jenny Holman – the same as our daughter, Jenni Holman, and it gets a little confusing. Robert and Jenny have three young boys. When you add them to the three kids that Jenni and Jason have, it was a wild night. At one point I was in the middle of six kids who couldn't stop laughing. What were they laughing about? Nothing that I could tell or maybe they were laughing at me, but their giggle boxes were turned upside down. When was the last time you had your giggle box turned upside down? For some of you it looks like you've turned it into a lockbox and set it aside.

The Bible says we should have joy unspeakable full of glory. Proverbs 17:22 says a cheerful heart is good medicine. *Reader's Digest* paraphrased that to be "Laughter is the best medicine." Go ahead, don't be afraid to laugh. I read somewhere that if you suppress laughter it goes down and just spreads out your hips. I don't know if that's true or not—but go ahead and express the unrestrained joy of kids.

B. Kids in the Kingdom show UNRESERVED LOVE

You saw how naturally Lizzie and Caroline said they love me. They tell me that all the time. I and I tell them I love them, and Grant as well. It's easy for kids to do. It's sad, but it seems the older we get, the more reserved we become in expressing our love. Men are the worst. It's hard for tough men to express love for their spouses, much less other men. We live in a time when we don't want to be heard telling another man, "I love you." There are several of my guy friends that I tell that I love them often. But you have to have the lingo down. We never say, "I love you." You have to tell them like this, "I love you, man." And they may say, "I love you, too, dog."

When we gather this should be a place where love is expressed in a safe environment. It should be a place where non-threatening hugs should be passed out freely. We need to be more child-like in expressing our love to each other.

C. Kids in the Kingdom have UNCOMPLICATED TRUST

Did you see how Lizzie/Caroline jumped up into my arms? They had absolutely no doubt that I was going to catch them. They trusted me. Since they were little we played a game where they stood of the counter and I stood there and said, "Jump and I'll catch you." They never hesitated.

When it comes to the Bible stories, they just hear them, enjoy them and believe them. For them, the Christian life isn't some complicated problem to be figured out. It is just accepting God's love and trusting Him. Some people claim children have to become like adults in order to understand enough to trust Jesus. But Jesus said adults must become like children in order to be a part of His kingdom.

I heard about something that supposedly happened at the CIA years ago. I don't know if it's true, but it's a great story. An agent found a piece of paper in an elevator with a code on it. The slip of paper said, "K1P2CO8K5." He took it to the code breakers and they tried to decipher it, but couldn't make any sense of it. After several days of attempts, one of the older ladies who had worked there for years looked at it and said, "That's simple. Those are knitting instructions. They mean "Knit 1, Purl 2, Cast on 8, Knit 5."

There's no Bible code to crack. Simply read it and believe the way a child does. I think it's a sin to make the Bible complicated. The entire Christian life can be summarized in three commands of Jesus. He said, "Come unto me." That's salvation. He said, "Follow me." That's discipleship. And He said, "Abide in me." And that's the Spirit-filled life.

Jesus said that we must change and become as little children if we want to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Let me leave you with a couple of take away truths from this episode:

Take-Away Truth: There are no little people

The world recognizes the stars, celebrities, and VIPs. But Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me." What a great time to be reminded of this with VBS coming up in a couple of weeks. When you are welcoming children and loving them, you are really welcoming Jesus.

In the 1990s, Leona Helmsley, a billionaire, owned a number of upscale hotel properties. Her nickname was "The Queen of Mean." She was arrested and convicted of tax evasion. In one interview she was asked about paying taxes. Her infamous reply was, "Oh, we don't pay taxes. Only the little people pay taxes."

That's the attitude of some people—it's them—and everyone else is insignificant. But Jesus taught us that there are no little people, just people loved by God.

Sandi Patty used to sing a song entitled, "In Heaven's Eyes." The chorus said, "In Heaven's eyes, there are no losers; In Heaven's eyes no hopeless cause; There's only people like you; with feelings like me; amazed by the grace we can find in Heaven's eyes."

Take-Away Truth: There are no little tasks

Jesus said, "Anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." We think people who preach, or go to the mission field have a more important job than anyone else. But Jesus taught that giving a cup of cold water in His name would be rewarded.

One day Jesus is going to say, "Thank you for feeding me when I was hungry. Thank you for visiting me when I was in prison. Thank you for clothing me when I was naked." And we're going to say, "Lord, when were you hungry, or in prison, or naked?" And He'll say, "When you did it to one of the LEAST of these my brothers, you did it to me."

The key for both of these is that we welcome people and serve people IN HIS NAME. We don't do it in our name, or the name of the church. It's only when we do it in the name of Jesus that He receives the glory, and we receive the reward.

CONCLUSION

In one of Zane Grey's novels about the Wild West, he writes about an Indian tribe that is fleeing in the night from a stronger tribe. The chief of the weaker tribe instructed his people to wait until midnight, and then they were going to escape under the cover of darkness. The tribe came to a creek swollen with melted snow and the knee-deep river was rushing furiously. There were many young, sick, and elderly tribe members and the chief ordered the younger braves to carry them through the swift current. But some of the younger braves chose to ignore his order and they waded into the creek alone. The current was so powerful that one-by-one the single braves were swept away. But the other braves who carried children or the elderly on their backs found that the added weight of their burdens kept their feet planted securely on the bottom and they all made it to the other shore. There's a profound lesson in that story. If we go through life only caring for ourselves we face the danger of being swept away by the swift current of our culture. But if we take the time to carry others who are in need, we find that they aren't really burdens at all; they give us a moral stability that gives our lives meaning.

When you die, will anyone say, "He was a great man" or "She was a great woman"? Instead, Jesus teaches us that goodness is more valuable than greatness. The best award we will ever receive will be when we hear the Master say, "Well done, GOOD and faithful servant."

OUTLINE

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Kids in the Kingdom have:

- A. Unrestrained joy
- B. Unreserved love
- C. Uncomplicated trust

TAKE-AWAY TRUTHS:

1. There are no little people
2. There are no little tasks

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*