

Seeking Greatness

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[0 : 00] What we'll focus on this morning is right there in verse 43. In verse 43, Jesus says, whoever among you desires to be great.

And that means that Jesus is saying that if you want to be great in life, there's a way. And so Jesus says to us that the concept of greatness, whoever among you wants to be great, you wanna have a great life, you want to be great, you want to live the great life, that actually greatness really is a Christian category, a category that Jesus brings up here in verse 43.

And so he raises this question, what does it mean to be great? He says, if you wanna be great, whoever desires to be great, here it is, what does it mean to be great?

What does it mean to live the great life? He addresses that very directly here. And as you might expect, Jesus' view, Jesus' treatment here of greatness is going to totally flip upside down every single culture's view of greatness for all of world history.

It's gonna flip it on its head, what he means here by greatness. And it's basically this, that greatness to be great, to live a great life, is not a product of your achievements.

[1 : 22] To live a great life is not a product of your achievements. It's less for Jesus about what you do, and it's more about who you become. That's the difference in the world's definition of greatness and what Jesus is gonna teach us here about greatness.

Now, this is one teaching, if you will, one look at this one sermon across two weeks, just because, as you know, I never have enough time.

And one sermon across two weeks, in other words, there are three things here that Jesus teaches us we need to become great. Do you wanna live the great life? And he gives us the three things, really they're the three words here, and we'll look at the first two this week, and then especially the third next week.

And here's what he tells us they are, in order to be great, in order to live a great life, you first need to cry for mercy. You need to cry for mercy, then you need to be ransomed.

And then finally, you need a life of service. Okay, so let's think about just the first two of those this week. And the first thing he tells us here is that the great life, to be great, begins in a cry for mercy.

[2 : 33] Verse 32 to 34 is this little section where Jesus predicts his death. This is the third time he's predicted his own death in Mark's gospel so far, since the halfway point, chapter eight.

And now the text tells us, Mark tells us he's actually headed towards Jerusalem. So this is the third time he predicts his death, but the first time he's done it, where he is walking towards Jerusalem to actually die, to actually experience it.

And you can see that Mark in verse 32 points out that he was leading the way, and everybody else was following way behind him. Now imagine that you are going toward your execution.

And if you're walking towards your execution, what position do you take in the parade? Your feet are dragging while the soldiers are carrying you along.

Jesus Christ is headed towards his execution, and he is leading the way, and everybody else can't keep up. His face is set towards Jerusalem. He knows what he came for. And he says, we're going to Jerusalem now, I'm going to be mocked, flogged, spit at, and killed.

[3 : 44] So this is what he says in verses 32 to 34, while the disciples are trying to keep up with him. And then verse 35, the comedy, you're supposed to laugh at this, the comedy starts.

James and John, Jesus has just said, I'm going and I'm going to be mocked, spit at, flogged, and murdered. And they say, okay, but we're going to ask you something.

And we want you to say yes to whatever we ask you, no matter what it is that we ask. That's their response. And they turn to him and say, okay, that's fine, but give us, we want to blank check a request.

We're going to make a request, we want a blank check sign from you. And the way they respond to Jesus in verse 35 is sort of like when you sit down with a child, you sit down with children and you say, our dear friend, our dear neighbor is very sick, and we don't know what's going to happen to them.

And they nod and say, okay, but can I ask you something? And you have to promise you're not going to get mad at me no matter what it is I ask you for. And you say, okay. And they say, is it okay if I eat an ice lolly now, even though I've already had chocolate earlier?

[5 : 03] Right, and you say, what, this is the wrong time. Why are you asking me this right now? This is exactly the same thing. Jesus says, it's time to go to Jerusalem, I'm going to be spit on, flogged, murdered.

And they say, can we ask you anything? And you have to say yes no matter what. That's the preface. And Jesus is so gracious with them, like little children, he turns to them and he says, what do you want me to do for you?

And the reason he's so gracious and gentle is because his face is set towards Jerusalem for them. He's headed to Jerusalem. He knows why he came, he came to be spat on, to be flogged, to be murdered for that dumb question.

For the fools that have just asked him that. He came for them and so he's gentle, because they are the object of his cross. And so he says, what do you want me to do?

And I'll do it. He gives it to him, the blank check. And here it is, the question of greatness. What is it specifically that they ask for? And you can see it. He says, will you allow us to sit?

[6 : 11] James and John say, will you allow us to sit at your right hand and your left hand in your glory? And that question is exactly the same. This is what they ask. They say, will you make us the most prominent, the greatest of your followers when your kingdom comes?

Now in the first century and the ancient world, to stand on the right and the left of the king are the two most glorious positions in the kingdom, besides being the king.

The left is a little inferior to the right hand. And I don't know which one James and John thought they were getting left or right, but those two jobs, that's the CFO and the CEO of the kingdom to come.

And that's what they're asking for. And so they're saying, as he tells them, my face is set towards Jerusalem to be spit upon. They say, can we be the CFO and the CEO when all that's finished?

When the kingdom comes, that's the question of greatness. And you know that that's what they ask because he confirms it. You can see down in verse 43, in verse 43 he says, whoever wants to be great, if you wanna be great, you see he's saying, I know what you're asking for, you're asking for greatness.

[7 : 21] And he's gonna subvert their image of greatness, but he's confirming that that's exactly the question they've asked. Do you, whoever among you wants to be great? And then just before that in verse 42, he gave the illustration of the Gentile rulers.

And he's telling us that James and John think greatness is the same thing as the Gentile rulers think greatness is. And what does Jesus say that is, it's the ability to dominate other people with power.

He says, you know, the Gentile rulers lured the power over everyone to dominate. And he says, you, James and John, think that that's what greatness is. That's what you've just asked for. The ability to rule, to have power, to dominate.

And so in their minds, it's power and it's authority that they're asking for. Now, this is the most common conception of greatness in world history.

Power, authority, rule. It's the most common way people think about greatness in every century in all societies throughout all of world history.

[8 : 24] And we treat power in this frame, this heightened form of power as a zero sum game. Right, either I have it or you have it. It's me or them.

And that's exactly what they're saying. James and John are saying, look, somebody's gotta be at the right and the left. And it's either gonna be me or it's gonna be one of the 10. And you can see that that's what they meant because in verse 41, it says that the 10 were so mad because they know exactly what's been asked.

They've been asked the question of zero sum power. Will you make me great? It's fundamentally framed in the world of competition. And that's what they think Jesus has come to do.

Make people great, give them power. Now look, Jesus' grammar in verse 43, did you catch it? It's the conditional future tense, right?

He says, if you would become great, if you want to in the future become great, would you become great? This is how you do it. And that means that the way Jesus puts that in verse 43 is asking every single one of us to look deep down into our hearts and ask yourself, ask myself, what is my conception of the great life?

[9 : 36] What do I think greatness is? What is it for me in my mind to live a great life? What is it for me to find greatness in this life? Now for some of us, we are tempted by exactly the conception of greatness that James and John talk about here, power, authority.

And in our world that looks something like saying, you know, at the end of my days, I will know that I have achieved a great life if I've left the mark, if I've left my mark, if I'm remembered for something. It's, you know, I want at some point in my life to be able to exercise authority, to get the corner office, to have economic success, to have some type of level of award in what I've chosen to do in this life, some type of level of achievement.

I want others to say of me, well done. And we're tempted by the same concept of power and authority in any way, shape, or form or frame, even if it's much less than CFO of the kingdom of God.

Some of us, this is exactly the thing we struggle with. And let me say this morning, if that is your struggle, achievement, if you're an achievement-driven person, like James and John, if you think in this frame, then that means that the main conception you have for what to do in life, what would make your life great, is fundamentally rooted in competition.

[11 : 03] That's exactly the framework that James and John thinking, is competition, it's a zero-sum game. I have it or they have it. And that means if your life is framed in competition, then it's fundamentally framed in a position of pride or self-centeredness, that I'm here to get at the expense of everybody else.

And what happens when we drift and drift and drift into achievement mindsets, self-centeredness, pride takeover, and envy becomes the primary form through which we experience life.

Envy does, because you look out and you see what other people have accomplished, what other people have achieved, the corner office, that that person has, that you've always wanted, that job, that relationship, that thing, and it's envy, covetousness, that actually takes root deep down in the heart.

And if you don't get that thing you want, envy always transfers into some form of bitterness or vengeance. You see, achievement-driven personality, achievement-driven idolatry fundamentally can, it can surprise you with how far it might take you down the road of saying, if I don't get that, I'm willing to do this, I'm willing to do whatever it takes.

Envy, built on pride and competition, always can give way to vengeance. And it can surprise you, the depths that you might sink to, to really get the thing that you want in life.

[12 : 37] Now, this hunt, this chase for greatness will either do one or two things. It will destroy your soul, it will. And it will do it in one or two ways.

One way is you'll get the thing that you want, that you're seeking, or you won't. You won't get it. And either way, you're doomed. Right, because on the one hand, if you get the thing that you want, this is, has this happened to you?

You want something so bad in life. And you get that thing, and it actually doesn't do it for you. It doesn't fulfill you. It doesn't bring you to the contentment that you thought you were gonna have. And so you're left empty in questioning the meaning of life. Or you don't get the thing you want, and you feel, you perceive your entire life as failure.

And so then your personality becomes one of failure. You feel that you are fundamentally failure. It becomes your identity. It becomes your identity. And either way, this chase, this pursuit, this achievement-based mentality towards greatness, that every single culture teaches throughout all the centuries, it's proven right here in this passage, it will ultimately fail you, and it will curse your life.

[13 : 49] Now, that's why any time you watch a celebrity documentary, maybe you don't watch this, I don't really watch this, but if you watch a celebrity, if you read about celebrity, if you watch a great person, a great achiever documentary, there will come a moment in it where that will always be the same.

It'll be this moment where they're interviewing the person and the person says, I decided I realized at some point in my life that no one was going to give me the things I wanted from life.

Everyone says that. No one was going to just give me the things I wanted in life. I realized at some point, if I'm going to have the life I want to have, I have to go out there and I have to take it. I have to work hard for it.

I have to go and chase my dreams. I have to go after what I want. And it's been written in many, many essays that the worst thing that can happen to us is for us to actually get the thing that we think we desire the most.

And what happens when we do is the same thing that Percy Shelley captured in his great poem, *Ozzy Mandius*. Percy Shelley, the husband of Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein*, he got married here in Edinburgh.

[14:54] He writes a poem called *Ozzy Mandius*. And it's about a traveler in ancient Egypt who comes upon a plaque in the middle of the desert. And this is what it says.

The plaque reads, my name is *Ozzy Mandius*, King of Kings, look on my works, ye mighty and despair. And it says, nothing beside the plaque remained.

Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away. You see, the greatest things anybody has ever done in human history, the greatest achievements, they're not remembered.

They're just replaced. It's an empty life. One of our elders told me this past week of the story of John D. Rockefeller when he died. 1937, Rockefeller, he owned most of New York City.

He still thought to be the wealthiest man in human history per capita, per capita. And the story is that at his, the reckoning, his estate lawyer came up to the front and somebody shouted out, tell us, just tell us, oh lawyer, how much did John leave behind?

[16:03] And the lawyer said, all of it, all of it, every single bit. There's nothing. He took nothing. And that's it. All of it, every achievement will ultimately come to naught.

In the old world, achievement culture says that greatness is defined by having a role model, a hero, and you chase after that thing. You see what somebody else has done before you and you go after it.

That's the old world. In the new world, the world that we live in, the modern world, it's slightly different. You may be coming today and saying, look, I hear you, but I'm not really driven by that conception of greatness.

I don't really care about achievement and award in that same type of way. But you know what greatness actually means in the present, in the modern culture? It means that you have to look deep down inside of you and decide what you want to be.

You don't listen to how people in the past have defined greatness. You don't look at the hero's stories. You don't look at the role models. Instead, you say, deep down in my heart, this is what I want for my life. You decide what to be and you go be it.

[17:08] See, the new conception of greatness is actually that everybody's greatness is just their greatness. You look deep down within and you decide what greatness is gonna be for you and you go after it. You chase it.

You say, I'm not tempted by achievement, but what is it that you want? What is it that you want most in life? What is your conception of greatness? Whatever it is, that's the great life to you. And for many of us, it may just simply be, I want that relationship that I've never had.

That would be achievement, that would be the great life. I want the job. It doesn't have to be the CEO. I just want that job. I just want that thing. And David Goggins, David Goggins, he's probably the most famous public persona right now of hyper-achievement culture.

He says that every single morning, you have to stand in the mirror and really face who you really are and you have to say, these are all the ways I know I'm not great.

These are all the ways I know I have yet to achieve my dreams, my goals. He says, no matter how small they are, and then what you do is you take sticky notes and you put them around the mirror and you say, this is my goal, this is my dream, this is who I want to become, this is what I want to achieve.

[18:14] And then you say, now you got to get out there and you got to work till you drop to get there. No matter how tiny that little dream may be, that he says, that's greatness. The person who can stand in the mirror and really own where they're not great and go after it, go get it, go chase it.

In other words, even the smallest thing, the smallest desire, the smallest thing, like a relationship, like a job, no matter what it is, can become greatness culture for you.

And you can be driven and driven and driven to Whitson chasing it and the Bible calls that functional idolatry. And Jesus comes and says, I'm gonna turn your entire conception of the good life upside down.

And then here's how he does it. He says this, the Bible says this, the great life achieving greatness, seeking greatness, is not fundamentally a fulfillment of our personal desires.

That's how he turns it upside down. He said, the great life is not that. It's not deciding who you're going to be and go get it, go chase after it, work hard for it. That's not it.

[19 : 28] Now, this is how he shows us. Down in verse 46, there is a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. And Bartimaeus is on the side of the road and Jesus passes by him and he shouts, have mercy on me, have mercy on me.

And the disciples and the others in the crowd rebuke him and scoff at him. And fundamentally, they tell him to be quiet. If there's anybody in this story that's not great, it is the blind beggar.

See, James and John had said, make us great in your kingdom. And then Jesus passes by this beggar and he says, have mercy on me, oh Lord. And everybody says, he's not great.

Don't listen to him. Even in that culture, he's not thought to be great. They want to be great. This is the exact opposite of greatness. And you can see exactly Mark's point if you look down at verse 51. In verse 51, Jesus says, the blind beggar says, have mercy on me. Jesus stands still. Jesus is floored by this request.

[20 : 32] He stops for him. And then he says, what do you want me to do for you? Now, have you heard that before? If you go back up, James and John said, we're gonna ask you something.

And no matter what we ask you, you can't get mad and you have to say yes. And Jesus says, okay, what do you want me to do for you? The beggar comes and says, have mercy on me.

They said, make us great. He said, give me mercy. And Jesus gives the same question. What do you want me to do for you? You see what Mark's doing?

He's saying, these two fools at the beginning thought they were seeking greatness, but only one person in the story really is. You know, it's the same question. If you want to seek greatness, when the Lord says to you, what do you want from me?

You don't say, make me the CEO. Instead, you say, have mercy on me. Let me follow you. And you can see the pinnacle of this passage is in verse 52.

[21 : 34] When he says, what do you want me to do for you? He said, let me recover my sight. Why? Not just so he can see, not physical, not merely. And you know that because in verse 52, here it is.

Here's the climax. Jesus says, I've given you the ability to see. Now go your way. Now go your way. James and John said, make us great. You know, will you help us, will you help us get on the path to greatness so that we can go our way? You know, we follow you Jesus only so that you can lead us to that CFO title one day.

But Jesus gives this man his sight and he says, now you're free. You can go make your life. You can go take your path. You can stand in front of the mirror every day and put the sticky notes all around it and say, this is my greatness.

This is what it's gonna be. I'm gonna achieve it. He says, I've given you the possibility of your sight. Now you can go make a life for yourself. And Mark goes out of his way to say one thing. He didn't go his way.

[22 : 33] See, Jesus says, go your way. And Bartimaeus went and followed Jesus. He says, I will give you the freedom to choose your own path to greatness.

And Bartimaeus says, I only want my sight so I can follow in your train. And that means that we're being told here that the path to greatness is Psalm 115 verse one.

When you come to a point in your life where you can say, not my glory, not my glory, but your glory, oh Lord Jesus. Where you can get to a point where you cry for mercy and you follow him.

Now this is a very simple passage really. It's just simply saying, what's the great life? The great life is not to follow your dreams. The great life is to follow Jesus and be conformed to him.

He says, if you would want to be great, become a servant like me. That's it. Now let me apply this in one way and we have to move to the very last thing very briefly.

[23 : 36] This is so important. This is so important for every one of us because most of us, most people in this life, in our life, do not achieve greatness in the way that James and John were seeking it.

99.9% of us are never gonna be the CEO and we're never going to be J.D. Rockefeller or Ozzy Mandius or Queen Elizabeth I or II or anybody like that.

We're never gonna be that. And you know that but even more than that, what if you never even reach your ordinary goals?

You say, you know, I know I'm never gonna be J.D. Rockefeller and own a building in New York City, even one. But what if you so far in life have not even reached the things you set out to do in the most ordinary mundane ways?

And what if even more than that, far from reaching those ordinary goals, that job, that relationship, that house, that income, whatever it may be, what if even more than that, you've actually gone through and more than that, you've actually gone the opposite direction and made a total mess of your life.

[24 : 45] You know, your sins are so many and so palpable and you've struggled so much that you feel like you've gone the opposite way. Jesus Christ comes to offer you the greatest freedom to say that everything the world says to you about greatness is wrong.

That even if you've made the biggest mess, the biggest mess of your life, you cannot get past your sins. They've taken you all the way to the side of the road even, like Bartimaeus.

Jesus comes today to say that is not what life is for. You know, in other words, he's saying it's never too late. No matter what you've done, never too late.

That greatness is nothing but saying, Lord, show me mercy. I don't want my way, I'm gonna follow you all the way to Jerusalem. But that's the great life, it's as simple as that.

It's never too late. There's no better place to illustrate this than in C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. In Lewis's book, *The Great Divorce*, he has a vision of heaven.

[25 : 50] And in this vision, he's being guided by a guide and the guide is showing them around and what heaven looks like. You know, you don't build your theology off the great divorce, but it's just a helpful illustration, okay?

Lewis, he's in heaven and he says that he hears music and he sees a parade and this is what it says. If I could remember the singing and write down the notes, no man would read that score, no man who read that score would ever grow sick or old.

There were musicians and after the musicians came a lady in whose honor all this was being done. Only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face.

Is it, is it, he said to his guide, he thought for a moment that this is Mary, the mother of God in this parade. No, no, no, not at all, said the guide.

It's someone you'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green. He says she seems to be a person of very particular importance here.

[26 : 53] I, she is one of the great ones. You've heard, you've heard, you will have heard that fame in this country and fame on earth are two very different things.

What is her fame? What's her greatness? That's what he asks. And this is what the angel says. The abundance of life that she found in Christ flowed over into everyone around her.

There was enough joy in that redeemed saint to awaken the dead. The secret to greatness is when you find a place in your life where you cry for mercy and say, not my glory, not my personal desires, I just exist to follow Jesus.

Now, we have to close and we'll close with this secondly and we'll pick back up on this next week. Ransom. What is life for? Cry for mercy, follow King Jesus and then he says and serve like he did, become like him.

That's what we'll focus on next week. But as we end today, the question becomes, where do you get the power? Where do you get the power to even cry for mercy? Where do you get the ability to even see your life in this way, to turn and follow him like Bartimaeus did, to put away the corruption of James and John's culture?

[28 : 11] What's deep down in the bottom of our hearts, where do you get the power? This passage is all about the cross. Now, you'll have noticed that already. Verse 32, verse 35, he predicts his cross.

I'm going to be flogged and beaten and murdered. Verse 38, he says to James and John, he says, you asked to stand on my right hand and on my left hand, you have no idea what you're asking for. Because he was thinking of his cross and he's saying, you want to be on my right and my left, that means that you're going to have to hang on a cross next to me, thinking of the two criminals that

would. That's where you want to be?

It's all about the cross. And then down in verse 42, he says this, you want the great life, you must become a servant, even a slave of all, he says.

And then he concludes it and he says this, and here's our focus, verse 43, even the son of man, even the son of man. See, when he says that, he's identifying with all of humanity, even the son of man came not to be served, but to serve all the way to the point of giving his life as a ransom for so many.

[29 : 22] Now what he's saying here is that the cross, that he would give his life, even the son of man, Jesus, who came to represent all of humanity, would give his cross as the ultimate example of service and all of human history.

The ultimate example of what the great life is, he's saying, look at the cross. Now look, in the normal conception of power, of greatness, there is a sacrifice.

And that sacrifices, if I'm going to go up in power, you've got to go down. If I'm going to be great, you've got to be less than me. It's the 13 year old frame of mind in every room that the 13 year old walks into.

You know, what does the 13 year old say, deep down in their heart, in every room they walked into? Either I'm great or they're great. Either they like me or they like that person. It's me or them. I want so bad for everybody in this room to like me and to like me more than the person next to me.

That's power, that's greatness in the eyes of the world. It's to say, at every point, there has to be a sacrifice. It's either me or you, one of us. And I'm willing to give you for my sake.

[30 : 29] Jesus Christ comes and says that the center of the great life is the exact opposite. It's the cross. And the cross says there is a sacrifice at the heart of the great life.

But it's not you for my sake, but me for your sake. It's that I have come to give my life for you, not demand your life for me. You see, the greatest, the most glorious, the only human being who is truly great from top to bottom is Jesus Christ.

And yet he came to say, I will give my life for yours. That's the concept of ransom. You see what ransom is? Ransom in the first century. Ransom in the first century is a marketplace exchange where you can purchase the freedom of a prisoner or a slave.

You can pay off their debts. You can buy them back from slavery. You can pay back from slavery or being imprisoned. And sometimes the way that worked in the first century was that you go and say, I will become the slave so that they can be set free.

And Jesus is saying that the heart of all greatness is the cross. In other words, that Jesus Christ came to purchase us from the imprisonment of our desires for greatness.

[31 : 45] He redeemed us from the curse of the pursuit of unholy power by losing all power. He freed us from the slavery to self-defined images of greatness by becoming the slave himself.

He became the beggar. He became the ultimately ungreat one so that we might become great. You see, you look at the cross and you say, Lord, have mercy on me.

I'm a beggar before you. I will follow you. And he says, that will make you great. The cross will make you great. Greatness is saying, not my way but yours, oh Lord, not my glory but yours, oh Jesus.

And it's the cross that gives you that power. It's the cross that teaches you that. Now the last word, the last sentence, and we'll pick back up here next week, is that this is actually the path to real freedom.

You can, if you look at the cross and you see what Jesus has done for you, that he has ransomed you and freed you from the imprisonment of false conceptions of the good life and the great life, you can actually go to work tomorrow and do your best and do great work and even achieve things.

[32 : 57] But you do it not from the position of enslavement, not from the position that I want the corner office, no matter what, not the position where you say, it's either me or them, but actually the cross frees you to just do good work.

Because Jesus Christ is your boss and your king. He's freed you from that imprisonment. And now if you go and achieve, you go and achieve for his glory.

And you say, not my will, not my glory, but yours, King Jesus, be done in the way I work, in the way I live my life, in the way I work hard.

He frees you. Let's pray. We ask that you would teach us the real path of greatness. And so we lift up our hearts today and ask that you would heal us from the false conceptions of the good life and

the great life and that you would tell every single one of us no matter how much we've achieved or underachieved, that crying out for mercy and looking at King Jesus on the cross for us is the real path to being truly great.

And we pray that you would teach us this week, especially Monday, as we go back into the world. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.