

Who is the Greatest?

By Bill Scheidler

The Desire to be Great

Is there anyone here who has a desire to be great? Have you ever wanted to be the greatest in a particular area?

Mohammed Ali claimed to be the “The Greatest” in the field of boxing. Whether or not he was is a matter of some debate.

It is one thing to be great in a field of endeavor (the greatest sportsman, etc.), it is one thing to be great by man’s evaluation, but it is quite another thing to be great in the eyes of God.

There is nothing wrong with having a desire to be great. Some of it comes out of a God-given desire for excellence. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be great as long as you are willing to play by the rules of the game.

God’s rules are a little different than man’s rules. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus teaches us how to be great in God’s eyes.

Warts and All

One of the ways in which we know that the Bible is true is that it records the events of the lives of the disciples,warts and all! If it was written to deify the apostles it would not have contained passages like the one we are about to read.

The story is told of a court painter who was commissioned to paint the portrait of Oliver Cromwell. Unfortunately, Cromwell was afflicted with warts on the face. The painter wanted Cromwell to be pleased with the painting so he omitted the warts in the painting (the air brushed look!). When Cromwell saw it he was not happy at all. He said, “Take it away! And paint me warts and all!”

Mark’s aim in his Gospel is to show us the disciples of Jesus, warts and all.¹ This passage in Mark is not a flattering one as far as the disciples are concerned.

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.”³⁶ And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”³⁷ They said to Him, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.”³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”³⁹ They said to Him, “We are able.”

¹*The Gospel of Mark*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia

So Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.”

⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be **greatly displeased** with James and John. ⁴² But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles **lord it over them**, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your **servant**. ⁴⁴ And whoever of you desires to be first shall be **slave** of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

There are some key words in this passage that bear further explanation:

“**Greatly displeased**” or **indignant** means to express displeasure, be offended, irate, incensed or angry.

“**Lord it over them**” means to domineer over, exercising dominion for one’s own advantage.

“He called them to him, and made quite clear the different standards of greatness in his Kingdom and in the kingdoms of the world. In the kingdoms of the world the standard of greatness was power. The test was: How many people does a man control? How great an army of servants has he at his beck and call? On how many people can he impose his will?”²

Servant refers to one who serves not rules.

Many believe that this word comes from the Greek word “diakonis” which means “in the dust laboring” or “running through dust”. Others believe it comes from the word “diako” which means to run or hasten on errands.

A servant is someone who does things that others would rather not do. It involves “working in the dust” of life.

Slave is a different word and refers to a slave (as opposed to a free man). A slave is...

- man of servile condition,
- one who gives himself up to another’s will,
- devoted to another to the disregard of one’s own interests,
- one who is in permanent relation of servitude to another.

A slave is one who has no rights but who is totally at the disposal of another.

Jesus’ Example

²The Gospel of Mark. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia

“To clinch his words Jesus pointed to his own example. With such powers as he had, he could have arranged life entirely to suit himself, but he had spent himself and all his powers in the service of others. He had come, he said, *to give his life a ransom for many.*”³

Jesus example of what He taught is best seen in John 13. Before we read it, it is important to understand something of the customs of the day.

Custom of Foot-washing

“After travelers had come a long distance, the host was to provide water for their feet as a sign of hospitality. Yet loosening sandals and personally washing someone else’s feet was considered servile, most commonly the work of a servant or of very submissive wives or children.”⁴

Jesus was nearing the time that he would be crucified. He had asked the disciples to prepare a room for them to celebrate the Passover together. They would use it for a few days prior during the days of preparation.

The disciples had prepared the room. They had ordered the food. They had the table and chairs in place. They had provided a water basin, a pitcher of water and a towel for the needed foot-washing.

The only thing that they forgot was hiring a servant to wash their feet. This is where we find ourselves in John 13. The disciples had been having one of their favorite discussions about who is the greatest among them. Jesus was going to show them **who is the greatest**.

John 13:1-17

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ² And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray Him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. ⁵ After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

⁶Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, “Lord, are You washing my feet?” ⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.” ⁸ Peter said to Him, “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” ⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.” ¹¹ For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, “You are not all clean.” ¹² So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?” ¹³ You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I

³*The Gospel of Mark*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia

⁴Keener, C. S., & InterVarsity Press. 1993. *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* . InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill.

am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus' challenge in washing their feet.

Notice the three things that Jesus knew that help us see His true heart...

1. Jesus knew all things had been given into his hands (vs. 3).

As a result He could have thought it too demeaning to "lower Himself" to such a task. He could have said, "I'm the main man here, let others do it."

2. Jesus knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God (vs. 3).

As a result he could have concluded that I have nothing to gain by impressing anyone. "I'm going to be out of here soon, let others work in their own dust."

3. Jesus knew that he was about to be betrayed (vs. 1).

As a result He could have been disillusioned and bitter thinking that the object of His attention was unworthy. "These disciples are going to desert me in a few days, one is going to betray me, let them wash their own feet."

The act of serving is not dependent upon who we are, where we are going or the worthiness of the object of our service. It is dependent upon our relationship to God and the fact that we were bought with a price and we are not our own.

Jesus' further Example

Philippians 2:1-8

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In this passage Paul highlights some of the things that will destroy unity and the effectiveness of the church (verse 3).

1. Selfish ambition

There is always the danger that people work not to advance the work but to advance themselves.

2. Desire for personal prestige

Prestige is for many people an even greater temptation than wealth. To be admired and respected, to have a platform seat, to have one's opinion sought, to be known by name and appearance, even to be flattered, are for many people most desirable things.

3. Concentration on self

“What's in it for me?”

“If a man is forever concerned first and foremost with his own interests, he is bound to collide with others. If for him life is a competition whose prizes he must win, he will always think of other human beings as enemies or at least as opponents who must be pushed out of the way. Concentration on self inevitably means elimination of others; and the object of life becomes not to help others up but to push them down.”⁵

If the church is to succeed we have to think like Christ did. We need to humble ourselves; we need to clothe ourselves with the apron of humility and be willing to wash the feet of others. We need to have the attitude of Jesus which is summarized in the following (verses 4-8):

Attitudes that will help us to be Christ-like Servants

If you can look at others and say these phrases, you know that you are positioned to be a servant of all.

“You are more important than I am”

...let each esteem others better than himself (Vs. 3)

“I am interested in what you are interested in”

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Vs.4)

“I am here to serve you”

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who...made Himself of no reputation (Vs. 5-7)

⁵*The letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.* 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia