

Dear friends in Christ,

What do you aspire to? What do you strive toward? What do you want to achieve in life? And just as importantly, what will it take to get where you desire to be?

I haven't met a person yet who doesn't aspire to greatness. Especially children! Children have dreams of making a real difference in this world. Ask them what they want to be, and it's almost always a profession where it is evident how they could be great. A doctor. A sports star. A movie star or singer. A teacher. A fireman. Each of these are positions our society perceives as great. We are born with this desire to make a real difference and be great. It's why super hero movies and shows remain so popular. We dream of being great just as they are.

Let me start by saying this desire for greatness is not a bad thing in and of itself. Jesus aspired to greatness. His disciples aspired to greatness. Martin Luther aspired to greatness. But what we need to do is define "greatness" and how it is achieved. Because the truth is, the way the world defines greatness differs greatly from how God defines it.

How does the world define greatness? Isn't greatness all about power / authority? Fame? Riches? Beauty? And if you can get all three! That is the ultimate. That is the perfect trifecta! Because this is how the world defines greatness, most consider the greats sports stars. CEO's of large corporations. Presidents of great countries. Supermodels. Actors and actresses. Rock stars. These are the greats! Let's compare this with what God says.

Aspire to greatness! What does this mean? How do we do it?

Mark 10:35-45

### **35 Then**

Okay, we have to stop with that one word. Clearly this reading comes in a broader context and in this case, the broader context is particularly important for us to fully understand what is happening here. Immediately before the events we are about to read, Jesus for a third time predicted to his disciples that he was going to be betrayed, condemned, flogged, and killed. And on the third day, rise again from the dead. You would think these profound truths would have had the disciples focused solely on Jesus, pondering the meaning, and considering how exactly this would all play out for their leader and friend.

With this context, it's especially shocking to us what comes next:

**James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."**

This already sounds a bit bold, but we can give them the benefit of the doubt. Jesus had invited his disciples to ask him for whatever they wanted, so they're taking him up on that offer.

**36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.** Jesus is willing to listen and help.

**37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."**

Isn't this shocking? Jesus just predicts suffering, death and resurrection, and all they can do is think about themselves. In glory, James and John want the two most prominent positions. Well at least they have their sights set on heaven, right? I'm not positive we can assume that even! Time and again the disciples seemed to think that Jesus would ultimately establish and

earthly kingdom. Could this still be in their minds? I get the impression that his words about his suffering, death and resurrection were a total mystery to them. They didn't begin to comprehend what he was saying. And so they respond by asking him for positions of greatness.

It's easy for us who have the whole Jesus story in mind to be critical of the disciples. How could they? Why didn't they get it? Why were they asking for such positions of greatness? Didn't they know what Jesus was all about?

But from our vantage point of having the whole Jesus story, doesn't that make our behavior and our striving for worldly greatness even more inexplicable? You and I have the benefit of having seen Jesus suffering death and resurrection. We have a detailed track record of our God's promises made and kept. We know he has ascended and will return again soon in judgment and will usher in his eternal kingdom. We know this world we live in is flawed, decaying, temporary and passing. We know the real, sin-free, joyful life that will soon be ours as we live in God's eternal presence.

Yet don't we also yearn for and strive toward worldly greatness? Haven't you dreamed of winning the lottery and having multi-millions? Haven't you dreamed of recognition and fame? Haven't you dreamed of being the boss... the president... the emperor of the world... and having others under your control? Where others have to listen and obey your every command? Haven't you ever dreamed of being handsome or beautiful... a head turner? When we dream of such things and yearn for them or strive after them, we are doing exactly what James and John did! We are asking the Lord to make us great in the eyes of others! But that's one prayer God does not answer. For if we are great in the eyes of the world, we will not be great in the eyes of almighty God.

**38 “You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said.** [And they didn't, did they? They really had now clue.] **“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”**

**39 “We can,” they answered.**

Drink the cup means the cup of suffering. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Take this cup from me... but not what I will...” And the word baptism here is not what you're thinking. Being washed over was a symbol of suffering. They thought they could suffer like Jesus. They were wrong in the narrow sense. No one could or would suffer like Jesus suffered for the sins of the world. But in a broader sense, they could suffer for the name of Jesus. And Jesus assures them that they will. James, in fact, was eventually put to death by the sword for his faith in Jesus. John was exiled to the island of Patmos. Both suffered greatly for Christ.

**Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”**

So they would indeed suffer for their connection to Jesus. But he's already showing them they're thinking wrong about the greatness they are thinking of. He doesn't grant their request to be on each side of him in glory.

**41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.**

They almost sound like children, don't they? The other 10 were mad at James and John. Probably for two reasons: 1) They were trying to get a position higher than the rest and 2) they hadn't thought to ask Jesus before they could!

Now the important part where Jesus really teaches them about greatness:

**42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.**

Jesus defines how the people of this world define greatness. When a person is in a position of authority, he is great. But then Jesus drops the bomb. He says, Do you really want to be great? Do you really want to shine in my kingdom and be the greatest? Come here. Let me tell you. Listen carefully. You can almost see the disciples sitting close when Jesus says, “You know how...” Yeah, we know how! Now tell us how to get into such a position, Jesus! Finally, this is what we’ve been waiting for! Tell us the secret!”

**43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must 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 as a ransom for many.”**

Can’t you almost picture the disciples slumping back in their seat when Jesus says these words? Oh... to be great you must be a slave to all. This isn’t really what they wanted to hear, and yet it’s the truth. It’s not what our ears want to hear, but listen to what Jesus says!

Do you want to aspire to greatness? Then you need to humbly serve. There is the key to greatness. Sounds so counterintuitive, doesn’t it? But here’s what this looks like. Let me tell you a story.

There was this man who was particularly gifted. He was so gifted, greatness just seemed a foregone conclusion to him. At a critical juncture in his life, when he was just beginning his career, a person of means, a highly influential person approached him and promised him that if he would just partner with him, he would have power, authority and riches. But the man refused. He had a concept of greatness and aspired to it... but this was not the way. Later, he had multiple opportunities to be very famous. But time and again, he’d move to a new town just when his popularity began to peak. Later, a time came when he was falsely accused for things he didn’t do. He could have easily gotten off the hook... he could have mounted an easy defense... but he didn’t. He took the blame for crimes he didn’t commit. And he was sentenced to death for them. By following this path, this man became the greatest man the world has ever known: the God-man Christ Jesus.

At his **temptation** in the wilderness: power, authority and riches. Exploding **popularity**, but he would retreat to places where he was not well known. Jesus was not about the greatness of this world. He was not about power and authority, fame and riches. Jesus knew the key to greatness was completely different and totally counterintuitive. Jesus knew that in order to accomplish the Father’s rescue plan for you and me, it would mean a very different path: Humble service. Jesus could have commanded the service of others, but instead he chose to serve. Jesus could have demanded the lives of many, but instead he gave his own... as a ransom for many. Jesus went the way of the cross to pay for your sins and mine.

Now Jesus says to you and me... are you looking for greatness? In this world, ultimate greatness can only be achieved through suffering, bearing the cross, and ultimately through death. Do you want a great family in God’s eyes? Humble service is the key. Do you want to be a great money manager? Humble service is the key. Do you want to be a great church member? Humble service is the key. The person that is great in the kingdom of God is the person that is constantly asking: “How can I help *you*. How can I serve *you*?”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray all of you aspire to greatness. I pray you do so by aspiring to humble service. What will it look like this week to do this? Give some prayerful thought to how you will humbly serve others today. Tomorrow. And the rest of this week. Let’s make today the day that we aspire to greatness... through humble service. Amen.