

GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM

“Some are born great; some achieve greatness; and others have greatness thrust upon them.”¹ These words of Shakespeare are well known. But what is greatness? How did the Greco-Roman world, including first-century Jews, view greatness? And how did Jesus define it? Arguably the New Testament, especially the Gospels, is the best place to find answers to both questions. Sometimes answers come as only hints; at other times they come explicitly.

IN EARTHLY KINGDOMS

The secular world of Jesus’s day sometimes measured greatness by pedigree. Having distinguished ancestors in one’s family tree could elevate a person’s reputation. Tracing Jesus’s heritage back through David to Abraham (Matt. 1:1-17) was a nod in that direction, although the Gospels’ genealogies primarily identified Him as Messiah.² Some Jewish leaders claimed, “Our father is Abraham,” believing that relationship made them greater than Jesus (John 8:39). Their lineage was “impeccable,”³ and they believed His to be illegitimate (v. 41). Their close ties to the patriarch, however, did not make them great men.

Another measure of greatness was wealth. Generally the first-century Jews believed wealth indicated God’s blessing.⁴ People saw it as a marker of greatness. As it turned out, however, that first-century “prosperity gospel” was wrong (Matt. 19:21-22; Luke 16:19-31). Great possessions do not make a man great in God’s eyes.

Authority also indicated greatness. In offering authority over earth’s kingdoms, Satan tempted Jesus to seize this idea of greatness (Matt. 4:8-9). And the Lord himself spoke of how human rulers dominate their subjects (20:25-28; Luke 22:24-25). Pilate boasted of his greatness (John 19:10). Jesus’s reply? Pilate would have no authority at all unless God gave it to him (v. 11).

Perhaps the most important measure of greatness in Jesus’s day was honor. People said a “great” man was the one being served at a banquet, not the one serving (Luke 22:27). Jewish leaders regularly sought honor, as indicated by their flowing robes and superiority in the knowledge of the Law. The scribes loved to be greeted and take the best seats in the synagogue. At a banquet, people longed for places nearest the host at the head of the table. Honor was the issue.

Even Jesus’s disciples fussed about who was greatest (Mark 9:33-34; 10:37). All of them thought great honor made great men, but Jesus had a different take.

IN GOD’S KINGDOM

Jesus turned conventional thinking about greatness on its head. His teaching about greatness made use of two main images.

Little Children: Jesus’s own followers were consumed with the question of greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1). In reply, Jesus called a little child to Himself and told them that childlike faith and humility led to greatness in God’s kingdom (18:2-4). It is easy to romanticize this image of innocence and dependence. But, in reality, children had little value in first-century society. The route of true greatness assumes the rank of a person who has no rank at all.⁵ Jesus also counted service to a little child as service done to Him and also to the Father who sent Him (18:5-6; Mark 9:37).⁶

Humble Servants: The pagan world considered humility a weakness, but Jesus redefined it as a prime virtue. Actually, He never defined humility as much as He demonstrated it (John 13:2-16). Two of His parables also highlight humility. In one, Jesus counseled people against taking the best seats at a banquet, lest they be sent to a lower place (Luke 14:7-11). Instead, He recommended taking the lowest place so that the host could move them to a more honored spot. His main point was humility.⁷

In another, a Pharisee prided himself on being such a great person, while a tax collector beat his chest and begged for God’s mercy. The tax collector went home right with God, but the Pharisee managed only to go home (18:9-14). Humility made the difference.

Humility alone, however, was not what made for greatness in God’s kingdom; it was humble service. Specifically, Jesus commended those who humbly served the needy (Matt. 25:31-46). By “the least of these,” Jesus probably meant gospel messengers.⁸ Regardless, the point of humble service remains the same.

Over and over again, greatness in God’s kingdom proves radically different to greatness in the kingdoms of earth. It rests on humbling oneself as a little child and serving others in Jesus’s name.

1. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act 5, Scene 1.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 3a, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 350.
3. Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 462.
4. Peter H. Davids, “Rich and Poor,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 703.
5. Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 78.
6. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 308.
7. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 3b, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1263.
8. Craig S. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 605.

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