

Sermon: What were you arguing about?
Sunday March 14, 2021

What does greatness look like? What does it mean to be great? Who do you think of when you think of a great person?

Maybe you think of someone who's the best at what they do. LeBron James in basketball, Beyonce in music entertainment, Jeff Bezos in business. These people have excelled in their fields and are at the top of their game.

Maybe you think of someone with influence. Your favourite Instagrammer, YouTuber or podcaster. These people have millions of followers.

Maybe you think of someone who has everything - mansions, fancy cars, private islands. They live the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Most of us will never be as famous or accomplished as these people. But the truth is, we all want to be great.

But here's the question. What does greatness mean for you?

Maybe you're a student and you want to do great in school. You want good grades so you can get into a good program at a good school and eventually get a good job.

Maybe you're into sports. You want to improve your skills so you can get onto better teams and play at the highest level.

Maybe you have a job or a company. You want to expand your influence and build your business. You want to impact more people and reach more customers.

Maybe relationships are important. You want to have a great marriage, a great family. You want to be a great friend or uncle or aunt.

Where do you want to show your greatness?

Wanting to be great is actually a good thing. In fact, God designed you for greatness. He's given you gifts and abilities, passions and dreams - that he wants you to leverage for the greatest impact.

But here's the thing: God doesn't think about greatness the way the world does. His idea of greatness is different from yours and mine.

So what does greatness look like according to Jesus? That's the question we're asking today.

We're in a series called *Jesus Has Questions For You*. We've been looking at various passages in the book of Mark. Jesus is making his way closer to Jerusalem where his cross awaits. And he's taking this time to teach his disciples. He wants to show them that the way of discipleship, the way of greatness is the way of the cross. Following Jesus isn't just about glory and victory; it involves suffering and death.

You and I are in that time of year now where we're moving closer to Good Friday and Easter. This Lenten season is a time for us to reflect on our own journey to the cross.

As a Master Teacher, Jesus knows the power of a good question. He knows that a good question can challenge you and transform you.

So Jesus has been asking his disciples questions. And the question we're looking at today is, *What Were You Arguing About?*

Before getting into our passage, let's look at the background. Jesus has been performing miracles. He feeds the four thousand, he heals the blind, he casts out demons. And as a result, large crowds are following him. The number of people flocking to Jesus is growing daily.

Isn't that a good sign? Jesus' ministry appears to be thriving. And the disciples are loving it! They're taking it all in. Because Jesus called them to be his disciples, they figure Jesus' success is their success! And for the first time in their lives, they feel significant, popular and powerful.

But Jesus has noticed this. Their desire for fame has become an obstacle to their calling. Their desire for admiration is compromising their mission.

How many of you are missing out on your calling because of the pursuit of your idea of greatness?

So what does Jesus do? He does a reset. He takes his disciples away from the crowds and gives them a lesson they will never forget.

Mark 9:30 says,

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples.

He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be **delivered into the hands of men**. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." (Mark 9:30-31)

This is the second time Jesus has predicted his death. The first time, he told his disciples that he would be *rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law* (Mark 8:31). In other words, he would be opposed by the religious leaders.

But he doesn't say that this time. This time he says that he will be *delivered into the hands of men*. In other words, he will be opposed by the very crowds that are coming to him.

Jesus is saying that **if the crowds are your gauge of success, you will never achieve true greatness**. Crowds are fickle and impossible to please. So don't let the crowds define success for you. Because these same crowds that are praising you will very soon turn against you.

Crowds do not define success; greatness isn't a popularity contest.

This is so relevant in our culture today. So many people define success as being famous. They're driven by a need to be seen and known. To have large social media followings.

In the past, people got famous for being successful. But in our celebrity culture, people can get famous without any achievement, skill or talent. We actually call that "being famous for being famous".

Of course, they're nothing wrong with fame. But even without Instagram, TMZ or People magazine, the disciples have become obsessed with it. They haven't learned to separate their identity from the crowd.

And so Jesus knowing that these disciples will be the ones to take his message to the world, puts them on the right path. He tells them again, that his mission isn't to draw crowds but to suffer and die.

³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

That's our question today. What were you arguing about?

As someone who uses lots of questions in meetings and coaching, I've learned that the way you ask a question can either open someone up or shut them down.

For example, asking *Why* questions make people defensive. Why did you leave the dishes in the sink? Why didn't you do your homework? Why did you miss the deadline?

But asking *What* questions make people stop and think. What made you do that? What were you thinking? What were you hoping to achieve?

Notice that Jesus doesn't ask the disciples, Why were you arguing? He asks them, What were you arguing about?

³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

The word for "argue" here, implies that these were private conversations. They didn't want Jesus to hear what they were saying. That's why they were embarrassed.

We don't know exactly what they said. Maybe they were arguing over who would be the leader after Jesus was gone. Maybe they were arguing over who would take the

most important positions in Jesus' new government. Maybe the three disciples who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain were rubbing it in the faces of the other disciples.

We don't know exactly what they said, but we do know that they're consumed with wanting to be great.

- They feel entitled to their rights and privileges.
- They jockey for honour and prestige.
- They set themselves over and above each other.

So Jesus gives them a lesson on true greatness.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

What's so interesting is that Jesus doesn't say that it's wrong to want to be great. He doesn't say it's wrong to have goals and ambition. He doesn't say it's wrong to maximize your potential.

He says, *anyone who wants to be first...* In other words, Jesus is affirming your desire for greatness. Jesus is affirming your desire to make a difference. Jesus wants you to be great. Greatness is part of his plan for you.

Type that into the chat: God wants me to be great!

So the question isn't, Is it wrong to want to be great? The question is, What does true greatness look like?

Usually we think greatness means being the best. People called Wayne Gretzky the Great One because he's the best to ever play hockey.

But how do you know if you're great? Maybe you know:

- If you have lots of Likes and Followers on your social media.
- If you get awards and recognition.
- If you get that job or promotion.
- If people admire you.
- If you have influence.
- If you have lots of accomplishments.
- If your business is growing.

This is how many of us define greatness. But Jesus has a different definition. He takes our idea of greatness and turns it on its head.

Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.

In one paradoxical statement, Jesus reorders our priorities and turns them upside down. If you want to be great, you must be a servant.

What is a servant? A servant is someone who sets aside their own rights. They don't live for themselves, they live to serve others. They don't scorn menial tasks, they do what needs to be done.

Jesus himself said that he didn't come to be served but to serve. And then he washed his disciples feet. He wants you to know that:

- Greatness isn't being first, it's being last.
- It's not setting yourself over others, it's placing others above you.
- It's not holding on to your life, it's giving your life away.

Type into the chat: Greatness is giving your life away.

But Jesus isn't finished.

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "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."

We live in a child-centred society, so this object lesson is lost on us. Because in our culture, children come first. Parents prioritize their children's needs above their own. But in Jesus' day, children were on the lowest rung of society. They had no status, significance or rights.

We almost expect Jesus to say, So Be like a child. That's what he says in other places. In Matthew 18, he says, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

But he doesn't say that here. He doesn't say, *Be like a child*. He says, *Welcome a child*. What does it mean to welcome a child in Jesus' name?

The only human relationship I believe that begins with unconditional love is the parent-child relationship. Think about it. Even when you're looking for a spouse, you want certain qualities. Maybe you want someone with similar interests. Maybe you want someone who looks a certain way.

But have you ever heard a parent say, Man, I can't wait to have this baby! They're going to make my life so easy! I can sit back and relax. They can take care of me and meet all my needs.

Of course not! What does a parent expect from their baby? Nothing. In fact, they know *they're* going to do *all* the giving. They'll be feeding them, changing their diapers, staying up late. It will *cost them* time, money and energy.

So why do they do it? They do it because they love them. They want what's best for them. And they'll do whatever it takes.

And this is the first characteristic of true greatness. **True greatness is doing good for others without expecting anything in return.**

What's the hardest part of this statement? It isn't doing good for others. People do good things all the time. The hardest part is not expecting anything in return.

Have you ever noticed that politicians are often questioned when they do photo ops? They're usually at a disaster site handing out food or talking to people. No one questions whether these actions are good. But people do question *why* they're doing it. Is it because there's a need? Or is it because there are cameras?

If I could be great in one area of my life, it would be in my marriage. More than being a great pastor or a great friend, I want to be a great husband. During the past month, my wife Joanne's schedule has gotten really busy. So I've taken up more responsibilities at home – more cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids.

Just so you don't think I'm this amazing husband, you need to know that even when I'm doing a lot, I'm still not doing as much as Joanne. She's the real superhero of our family.

So I was happy to help and support her in this busy time. But then last week something happened. After a busy day, as I was preparing the menu I had planned, Joanne suggested I not make a certain dish and told me to make another dish for her instead.

As she told me this, I didn't take it well. It felt to me critical and demanding. I thought about all I had done over the past month, and felt neglected and unappreciated.

So what did I do? I'd rather not get into that. But let's just say it wasn't pretty. You see, I want to be a great husband. I want to care for Joanne. I want to do good things for her. But there've been so many times when it's blown up in my face. Why is that?

This leads to the second characteristic of true greatness.

You see, it's good to do good for others. But true **greatness isn't just about your actions, it's about your attitude.** It's not about feeling significant or appreciated. It's about what you do when there are no cameras around. When there's no recognition or applause or appreciation.

So what does greatness look like for you?

- Maybe it's making time for your lonely neighbour even when it's inconvenient.
- Maybe it's mentoring a young person even when you have a lot on your plate.
- Maybe it's serving faithfully behind the scenes even when no one sees.
- Maybe it's doing what's needed for your family even when no one says thank you.

According to Jesus, true greatness is doing good even when you're misunderstood, even when your needs aren't met, even when no one else is doing it.

How many of you want to be great? You want to be a great husband or wife, a great father or mother, a great student, a great friend, a great worker. Because in your pursuit of greatness, you will run up against your desires. Your desire for appreciation and recognition. Your desire for achievement and results.

What do you do then? How do you do good, when deep down, there's something you want that you're not getting?

This leads us to the third characteristic of true greatness which is really the heart of Jesus' lesson. Because according to Jesus, **true greatness always involves death**. Pastor Steve said last week that taking up your cross means dying to yourself.

This means,

- Dying to having things your way.
- Dying to expecting people to respond the way you want.
- Dying to what other people even think.

Jesus not only died to his desires, he died on a cross. He didn't just give up his rights, he gave up his life.

When the crowds that he healed, fed and cared for, turned on him and called for his death - Jesus didn't call down fire on them. Instead he said, Father forgive them for they do not know what they do.

I think we're too hard on the crowds. Because you and I turn on Jesus all the time. (At least, I know I do.) We want to be great apart from Jesus. But as a result, we hurt those we love, we snap at them, we overwork, we neglect them, we become self-absorbed, we ignore the needs of the world.

But even though we reject Jesus, Jesus will never reject you. He went to the cross for you. He died for you. Why? Because he loves you.

The Bible says, Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

When you find your identity in Jesus and his love for you, you won't need to prove yourself anymore. You won't need the awards and achievements. You won't need the praise and recognition. Why? Because you have Jesus, and he's enough.

As you die to yourself, as you find your identity in Jesus and as you allow Jesus to meet your needs, you won't need to strive or prove yourself anymore. Instead, you will radiate a self-forgetful and unassuming goodness that comes only from him. It's a sign that Jesus is transforming you. Not so you can prove yourself *to* others. But so you can give your life away *for* others... because he gave his life away for you.

That's true greatness.

Let's pray.

Thank you Jesus for your great love. Thank you for demonstrating this love on the cross and for showing us what true greatness looks like - laying down our life for others.

Help us to live great lives, not in the way the world defines it, but in the way you define it. Not for our glory but for your glory.

We can't do it on our own, so change our hearts. Form in us your humility, melt away our ego and pride. Use us to be your instruments of love this week so that we can shine for you wherever we go.

In Jesus' name.

Amen