

### Jesus Shows Us the “Great” Life

1. It’s a Life that Humbly Serves All
2. It’s a Life that Willingly Welcomes All

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? Would it be a physical change? Your stature or facial features. Would it be a change in your abilities? Would you be smarter or more athletic? Would it be a change in personality to a type A instead of type B? Why would you want to change yourself? Is it because you want the looks and gifts and talents that make people great in the eyes of the world and you’d like a share in the “great” life? Today Jesus gives a lesson in greatness. We’ll see if we have the “great” life or not. Jesus shows us the “Great” Life. It’s a life that humbly serves all. It’s a life that willingly welcomes all.

Who doesn’t want to be great? We all have that desire for greatness. Just look at how willing people are to post themselves on the newest media platform. If you don’t know what TikTok is, you might not be headed for greatness. The disciples had a desire for greatness too. They even argued about it. They came to Capernaum. When Jesus was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. They knew it was wrong to argue, but instead of admitting their pride, they disguised their argument with a question. Matthew’s gospel tells us, “The disciples ... asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” (Matthew 18:1).

In those days, some Rabbis taught that there were different ranks in God’s kingdom. They said you could achieve a higher rank by being great in this life. Plus, remember that Jesus took only Peter, James, and John with him on a couple special occasions. Either one of these could have caused this argument about greatness.

Life Sunday Sermon

Mark 9:33-37 “Jesus Shows Us the ‘Great’ Life” (May 10, 2020)

Rev. Peter Sulzle, St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Redwood Falls, Minnesota

Or it was simply sinful nature. Can you blame the disciples for wanting to be great? We want to be great too! We have this sinful desire to be first and best and most important, many times at the expense of others. That desire leads us to boast of God’s gifts as if we’ve earned them. “I have this, and you don’t.” “I can do this, and you can’t.” Whether they’re thoughts in our heads or words from our mouths, they are wrong and sinful.

This shows us that the world only desires the best human life and only the best human life is the great life. Think about how this world treats life. The parent rationalizes the termination of the unborn child thinking, “I can’t bring a Down syndrome child into the world—his life won’t be great.” The family members of a cancer patient ask, “Why can’t we pull the plug to end their suffering—their life isn’t that great.” People who search for the wrong kind of greatness say, “Let’s genetically engineer the next generation of people to be smarter, stronger, and more talented! Then we will achieve greatness!” If you want to be great, get rid of the people that bring you down and attach yourself to people that have great lives. Sound pretty good? How easy it is to buy into these arguments and sinfully desire worldly greatness!

Are “normal” children better than mentally challenged children? Is a person without cancer greater than a person with cancer? Who decides which person or which life is “great”? Did you notice in those examples I gave that every one of them focused on “me” or “we.” What I think. What we felt. Is my opinion of worldly greatness all that matters? Jesus had an answer for the disciples. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Who is great? The one who doesn’t want to be great. A great life is a life of humble service that puts others first.

Do you know anyone who is perfectly humble, always putting others first? None of us. But there is One who showed perfect humble service. Jesus. He put himself last. Philippians 2:5-

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8 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.” Jesus put himself last to erase our pride with his humble obedience—to pay for our pride by his all-sufficient sacrifice.

We can’t genetically engineer a person who is great in the kingdom of God. We’ll never be able to “weed out” the pride gene. But God can. God has taken away your sins. He has changed your heart. He gives you the ability to put yourself last so that you can humbly serve others. That’s greatness and a great life in God’s eyes. That humble serving attitude values and serves every life whether that life is a few cells old or a gene short of worldly greatness.

It’s a hard battle to preserve the sanctity of human life in this sinful world. If only we could recruit a group of famous celebrities, powerful politicians, and university professors to our side! Those “great” people would help to benefit the cause. That’s a logical thought. But when Jesus instructed his disciples about greatness, he didn’t call for Herod, Pilate, or Ceasar. He wanted to show them that a “great” life willingly welcomes all. Jesus presented a little child as an example. 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.” Jesus was telling them that a great life is the life that willingly welcomes all people, not just the people this world sees as great.

We still don’t understand true greatness if we seek the favor of only worldly “great” people. We still buy into the world’s view of greatness. We often think that the most talented, most intelligent, and most charismatic people are the most useful to us. We welcome them into our lives (most of them virtually), but discard the others.

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Jesus words don’t make logical sense, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name.” What do children have to offer? You and I know that they have a lot to offer. They are a blessing to so many. But as far as worldly greatness, they don’t have much to give. When you help a child with their childish problems, can they help you with your adult problems? If you tie their shoe, can they fix your car? If you bandage their knee, can they save your marriage? Can they fix the economy? Give you a job? Mitigate a pandemic spread or care for the sick and dying? Little children can’t make people great any more we can make people great.

But doesn’t that clue us in to a great life that welcomes all? When you set out the welcome of your heart to a child, and you do it out of love for your Savior, you’re welcoming the way the Lord wants you to welcome. So you are also welcoming God. This welcoming service isn’t easy. It takes time, effort, and love. But God has plenty of time, plenty of strength, and boundless love to help. Willingly welcome all people, every life. Serve them. Help them. Teach them. Witness to them.

When you see your own failings—and haven’t we failed plenty of times—when you see that you haven’t served—and haven’t we been self-serving—when you see that you haven’t spiritually encouraged and cared for others—and haven’t we dropped the ball there—when you see how sinful you are—and haven’t we been selfish and unwelcoming—when you find yourself deserving of God’s wrath and anger, then look again to the One who is great. Often, when people realize they aren’t that great, they attach themselves to those who are. Look to your Savior Jesus who forgives all sin. Look to the one who gives greatness in the eyes of God by making you children of God.

And then, when it comes to greatness, God tells you to cling to those who may not be great. Embrace those who can’t help you. Love those who can’t give you anything in return.

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Then watch what blessings flow from his hand of grace. Watch how greatness becomes unimportant and life finds its true value in God and service to him.

It’s a terrible thing to see any life that is used and abused instead of being protected and cared for. The value of life should not be based on the benefits it can offer. So we pray to the Lord to move all people to value and appreciate all life as God’s gift. We ask for the ability to welcome and love and embrace and care for all children—our own included. We open our arms to the orphans, whether they are frozen embryos, babies with mental or physical challenges, or those placed for adoption by a young mother. We trust that the life God gives, in whatever stage and condition, is a blessing from him.

So what is a great life? You have one. God has given you one in Jesus. Thank God that Jesus, the first, became last and the servant of all. He did this to give you a great life in him and the greatest life in heaven. So you can stop striving for what you already have. You have a great life. A life of faith. A life that humbly serves. A life that willingly welcomes all. You don’t do it because that’s what Jesus would do. We do it because that’s what Jesus did for you. That’s what greatness is all about. Amen.