

TRUE GREATNESS

"But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Matthew 20:26-28.

Matthew tells us that Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John, came to Jesus and asked Him to give her sons the first places in His kingdom. It is only natural that a mother should dream of a great future for her children. Her ambition is an inspiration for her training of them. She came to Jesus, doing lowly reverence to Him, and making her request. She did not ask for herself, but with a typical mother's love for her sons she requested that they might sit the one at the Lord's right hand and the other on His left in His kingdom.

Ambition is natural to man and capable of good. The desire for greatness is inherent in practically every human spirit. Even the school boy's heart throbs with responsive enthusiasm when he reads Homer's hero's injunction to his son, "Always to be the best and superior to all others." Depravity has turned this principle to evil account, but it was implanted in us for the noblest of purposes. Next to the having of a wrong ambition, the worst thing that can befall one is to have no ambition at all, for then the main spring of his soul is broken and his energy and elevation are at an end.

Mothers should be cautious about seeking places of honor for their sons. When they do this, they frequently do not know what they ask. They may be seeking the ruin of their children. It is not posts of honor that secure earthly happiness or heavenly salvation. The sweet peace of the soul dwells most often far from the bustle of public life, and the storms and tempests of ambition. To Salome and her sons Jesus said, "Ye know not what ye ask." We often know not what we ask when we seek in our folly great things for ourselves. The best prayer is that of our Lord, "Not My will, but Thine be done." We frequently wish for this or that honor, this or that post of preeminence for ourselves, for our children, or for those who are nearest and dearest to us. We know not what we ask. We do not think of the dangers and temptations which lie before us, the envies and the jealousies which we provoke.

Christ did not put aside the granting of places at His right and left hands as not being within His province; He did not put aside the request of His apostles and their mother as if they were seeking an impossible thing; He did not condemn the request as indicating a wrong state of mind; nor did He rebuke their desire for reward; but He did state the stern principles and conditions upon which such honors were to be attained. He made it clear that they could have the reward if they fulfilled the conditions.

Christ did not condemn the spirit of ambition. He did not say that it is wrong to wish to be great. He did not seek to eradicate ambition, but rather to show what its true function is in regenerated manhood. He defined what true greatness is, and bade all of His followers to be ambitious after that. He substituted the greatness of love for the love of greatness; and to those who are eager for power He preached the might of service, and at the same time He held Himself up as the brightest exemplification of His words.

I. The Meaning of True Greatness.

What is true greatness? Scarcely two persons would give the same answer to this question. All would admit that it denotes pre-eminence, but each would have his own preference as to the department in which it was to be manifested. Some would associate it with power, some with courage, some with eloquence, and some with wealth; yet each would think of it as conferring an advantage on its possessor, and thus putting others at a corresponding disadvantage. Still the prevalent idea of greatness is far from that which the Saviour's words define:

Some regard greatness as consisting in wealth, social position or physical strength. A maxim of this world says, "Every man for himself." Prominent places are secured by those who seek them diligently, with shrewd management and artful maneuvering. Men seeking conspicuous places cannot understand the mind which was in Christ Jesus, who made Himself of no reputation and humbled Himself and gave Himself in service to and for others. According to Him, the really great man is he whom righteousness and love combine to inspire for the service of his generation by the will of God. Christ regards him greatest who uses his talents and possessions in the service of mankind. "He that will be greatest among you, let him be your servant." There was nothing more novel in the teaching of Jesus than His reversion of the common notions of service and greatness. All the world around, and all the ages through, the ordinary man has seen dignity in being served, and has seen a kind of indignity in serving.

He who wins this greatness does not do so at the expense of others. In the world men sometimes rise by pushing others down. Here the prize is won by helping others up.

Furthermore, we may win this greatness anywhere. In service a place is open always -- open to the poorest and the wealthiest; to the least intelligent and the most intellectual; to the youngest and the oldest; in the family and the church; in the neighborhood and in the world; yea, whoever a man may be, wherever he may go, and whatever may be his resources, he may be the means of helping others. Opportunities for winning this kind of greatness lie all around us.

And this greatness is satisfying to its possessor. There is satisfaction always in serving our generation. He who, by the grace of God, seeks to make the world better by his presence will from that effort derive the holiest joy. He will have within him the testimony of a good conscience, and above him the approval and blessing of Almighty God.

II. The Model of True Greatness.

In compliance with God's will, an announcement was made by an angel to an obscure priest, Zacharias, that an unusual character was soon to be born into his home, one who would be great in the sight of the Lord. Wasn't that God's way of saying that men would appraise him differently? They would not see in him the elements that make for greatness. In selecting her great, the world selects her heroes from the gridiron, the stage, the rescue squad, the battlefield, and the realm of philanthropy. She forgets that glamor and greatness are not synonymous. The truly great are those who do what God wants them to do, when and where He wants it done.

By accepted standards John the Baptist was not great. He did not leave a book for future generations to read, or poems to stir and inspire. He was a stranger to social circles; took little stock in political movements; and financially was a failure. He did not have a house in which to preach, an organization to support him, or a publicity agent to boost him. His ministry was short -- less than a year, yet God called him great -- great because he was faithful to his charge.

He was great as a preacher. His message bore the unfailing marks of eloquence. Men heard him and did what he said. He never resorted to tricks of oratory, but with simple words and brief sentences he broke men's hearts. His beautiful consistency of lip-message and life-message made him a pulpit power. His words were relatively few, but they were not fruitless. To the souls of men and women he brought God's message without fear and favor. The transparent sincerity of his soul and message made him a great preacher. He was also great in conviction and courage. This is the essence of moral greatness -- that a man have a grip on truth that criticism cannot weaken, that persecution cannot phase, and that martyrs' fires cannot break. He was great in the sight of the Lord. What else matters?

III. The Model of True Greatness.

"Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." He would not be ministered to. He saw too many souls about Him to be aided, too many sorrows to be comforted, too many doubts to be answered, too much spiritual darkness to be illumined for Him to wait for others' ministering. To see such needs was to long to supply them. To feel within Him the power to serve was to put forth that strength. To know the truth for which other souls were waiting was to utter it.

His death was but the climax and consummation of a life of serving. He was continually ministering. He was always at the call of weakness, or of suffering, or of want. Every one of His miracles was benevolent. He never thought of His own ease, nor did He allow regard for Himself to stand in the way of the manifestation of His love to others. Wherever a sick one needed healing, or a weak one needed strength, or a weeping one sought solace, there He was to be found doing appropriate service. He is the model of true greatness. Do not seek to imitate any other example.

IV. The Motive of True Greatness.

We are to seek true greatness for the sake of Him Who gave Himself for us. Jesus did not say in so many words, "Serve one another because I have served you;" but still the reference which He made to His death, as an example, brings before the mind of every Christian the magnitude of the obligation under which Christ has laid him. He died for us. But for His death our deliverance would have been impossible. Through His sacrifice our salvation has been secured. Thus we owe everything to Him. Our present privileges and our future hopes all center in Him. In view of His service to and for us, the great question of our hearts is, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits?" Now His answer to that inquiry is virtually this: "In love serve one another." Whenever you see another in need of your assistance, do your best to help him and that will be thanking Me, for "inasmuch as ye do it to one of the least of these ye do it unto Me."

If we would emulate Paul's greatness we must begin by receiving Jesus Christ into our hearts as our Redeemer and Saviour, and then we must go on by maintaining our love to Him until at length self shall be swallowed up in Him, and our one absorbing, overmastering ambition will be that we may reproduce in part His self-sacrifice on our lower level and within our more limited area.