

GOD'S RULE FOR 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.

"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." Matthew 20:26 (Moffatt).

Christ left the happiness of heaven and came to live in the midst of the world's misery. While here He ministered to the needs of the bodies and souls of people. His example and teaching prove that true greatness is entirely different from what most people think it is. He reversed the ordinary view of greatness. Whereas many measured greatness by the number of slaves or servants a man owned, Christ taught that it is determined by the number of people one can serve. "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your servant." Christ's idea of greatness is in sharpest contrast to the opinions held by men of the world. In the kingdoms of this world the great ones lord it over others; in Christ's way of living the great ones serve.

I. The Pronouncement Of God's Rule For Greatness.

Like so many gems in the teaching of Christ, this one appears in the form of an answer to a request. When our Lord made the announcement to His disciples of His sufferings soon to be endured, the doting mother of James and John asked Him to give her sons the first places in His kingdom. She did not ask for anything of a personal nature, 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 of power and glory about which He had talked and which He had come to establish.

Mothers should be very cautious about seeking places of honor for their children. When they do so, quite frequently they are like Salome in that they do not know what they ask. In seeking places of honor for them, they may be striving for that which will ruin their children. It is not posts of honor that secure earthly happiness or eternal salvation. Quite often we do not know for what we ask when we seek in our folly great things for ourselves. When we long for this or that honor, this or that post of pre-eminence 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 temptations and dangers which lie before us, or the envies and the jealousies which we provoke. In the case before us, just as soon as the other ten apostles heard of the request presented to the Lord, for the promotion of James and John, indignation filled their hearts, for the simple reason that they desired the same place themselves. It was directly against such a selfish spirit that the revolutionary words of our text were uttered by our Lord.

We must remember that 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 the Homeric 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 having a wrong ambition, the worst thing that can befall one is not to have any, for then his energy and elevation are at an end.

Christ did not condemn 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 strive for that. To those who were eager for greatness He preached the might of service, and at the same time He held Himself up as the brightest exemplification of His words. He informed Salome that greatness is

more than a matter of assigning places of eminence and handing out titles of nobility. Greatness comes not through concern for oneself, but rather through regard for others. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant.

If I understand Christ, the basic idea in genuine service is the shifting of your interest from self to others. Unless somehow this transfer be made, there is no real greatness for any man. Such is the pronouncement of the One Who is the Master-Servant of all ages. And nearly twenty centuries after His pronouncement, Harvard University places on its official seal a Latin inscription which, translated, reads: "Not to be served, but to serve." The rule stands, regardless of how far short men may come of it.

II. The Perversions Of God's Rule For Greatness.

James and John and their anxious mother were not alone in their warped notion of greatness and the way to attain it. Even today the prevalent idea of greatness is far from that which the Saviour's words define.

Whereas the law of true greatness is "Give all you can," the law of false greatness is "Get all you can." One man, under the touch of Christ, says, "The world is my field. I'll put into it everything I can." Another man says, "The world is my oyster. I'll get out of it all I can." One is greatness by contribution; the other is greatness by exploitation.

This false conception of what is great takes various turns. Here, for example, is a person who sets out to exploit life and the world for the pleasure that may be gained. For him the world is a huge stage upon which the players, in an endless procession, are to perform for his exhilaration and delight. If that person were to speak out frankly, he would say, "Watch me lord it over life, and make life yield up to me all the thrills it can produce." To be sure, as Bulwer has well put it, "The life of pleasure makes even the strongest mind frivolous;" but that of course is quite forgotten in the madness of eating and drinking and frolicking.

Or here is a person who is bent on achieving distinction in terms of wealth. Money is the false measure of greatness. He has one creed, and it is that of greed. To make money, and then more money, with never a thought as to how he is making it, and what the process may be doing to him and to others who work with him and under him. He forgets what a little man in England remembered, and because he remembered he became one of the real aristocrats of history. The little man was George Fox. He had a shoemaker's establishment. He was hungry for God and for contact with the world of spiritual reality. I must get alone, he thought, and give my soul a chance to meditate. But here was his work, his money-making. One day he made his decision. He cried, "Will all the shoe-wages under the moon ferry me across to that far Land of Light for which I sigh?" The result was that a shoemaker, who could have gone on making shoes and the world would never have heard of him, became a prophet of God and a minister of light whose name is written high among the immortals of Christian history.

Then, here is someone who dreams of greatness in terms of power--power to control his fellowmen and use them as pawns in the game of politics, or industry, or war. If all such could be persuaded to make their thoughts and dreams audible, they would say, "We are out to lord it over life, and make it yield up all the authority that can be concentrated in our eager hands." But they, too, have a way of forgetting. They forget that "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." They forget such bitter lamentation as that which fell from the lips of Cardinal Wolsey when, stripped of his power, double-crossed by his cronies, he cried, "Had I served

my God as I have served my king he would not have left me naked in my gray hairs."

To all who would associate greatness with pleasure, wealth, eloquence, position or power, Christ very emphatically says, "But it shall not be so among you." So throw away all these false yardsticks of greatness. Keep clear of these perverted ideas of what it means to win distinction, honor and greatness.

III. The Pattern Of God's Rule For Greatness.

"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." "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve." Jesus Christ in the role of a servant holds the key to the heart of the world. Suppose He had lived in soft and extravagant luxury, barking his orders at lackeys who waited on Him and at soldiers who fought for Him--do you think for a moment that we would be singing His praises or heralding His name in this service of worship? Why do we give Him the highest place in the gallery of history's great ones? Peter once gave the answer when he said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him." Acts 10:38. He did good to the bodies of men, healing their diseases, lighting up their blinded eyes, opening their deaf ears, restoring their withered arms and useless limbs. He did good to the minds of men, ministering to their sanity, informing them with truth, and enriching them with understanding. He did good to the souls of men, lifting guilt from their consciences, performing the surgery of purification in their attitudes and tempers, breathing upon them the power of moral victory for the battles of life. The crown and climax of His self-giving service was reached on the cross.

Christ did not come to 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. He was continually ministering. He was always at the call of weakness, or of suffering, or of want. 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 pattern of true greatness, so do not seek to imitate any other model.

IV. The Price Of God's Rule For Greatness.

It was not without cost to Himself that Jesus went the way of a servant to the throne He occupies as the Saviour of men. Nor will it be without cost to us if we take a servant's way with Him and in His name.

When the request was made that James and John might sit on the right and on the left of the Saviour in His kingdom, He replied, "Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto Him, We are able."

In substance Jesus said to them, You want to sit on My right and on My left. You think that such honors are conferred upon those who thrust in their request first. You are mistaken. When these high honors are finally awarded, it will not be on the principle of favoritism. It will be on the basis of fitness, and that fitness comes only along the costly way that I Myself am taking--losing one's life in order to find it. If you want to be near Me in splendor in the next world, be near Me in service in this world. If you would share My throne then, you must bear My cross now. These are the conditions. There is no other way. The price of greatness has no ceiling lower than this.

If we would emulate Paul's greatness, we must receive Christ into our hearts as Saviour, and then we must go on maintaining our love for Him until at length self shall be swallowed up in Him, and our one absorbing, over-mastering ambition will be that we may manifest self-sacrifice on our level and within our limited sphere.

This is the way to true greatness. It is not talents that make one great, however many and brilliant they may be; it is not knowledge that gives the highest enrichment to the mind and life; it is not great wealth that secures the most lasting places and the greatest honors among men. In none of these things does true greatness reside. True greatness is found in the use of one's position, one's powers and one's possessions in the service of God and man. Christ wants every Christian to know that a position in His kingdom is not simply a place of honor, but it is an opportunity for service. There cannot be any greatness apart from unselfish service for others. One can never forget that last sentence on the tomb of General Gordon, in St. Paul's Cathedral, which holds the key to his great life: "Who at all times and everywhere gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, and his heart to God."

"There are hearts that ache and hunger
For a sympathetic word;
There are senses cold and palsied
Waiting to be kindly stirred.
Many walk the way dolorous
Thinking none about them care;
Bearing burdens all too heavy,
You and I, as friends should share.

"If we only sensed the heartbreak,
Or could read the soul's deep need,
We would pause and offer succor,
And the Master's message heed:
'Inasmuch as ye to others
In my name have ministered,
Ye have likewise on my spirit
Benizons of love conferred.

"Shrouded in the garb of strangers,
Angels unaware you see.
Rise and serve them like a brother.
And in serving them, serve me!
Oh, the joy that crowns one's labor
When 'tis rendered not for fame.
But when all has been love-prompted
To the glory of His name!"