

GREAT TO GOD
Luke 9:46-48

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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How do you measure a church's success? What really counts when it comes to being a great church?

Some would say, "That's simple pastor. You look at the number of baptisms a church has, and that would tell you about her success." Kind of like notches on a gun – baptism numbers. The more you notch, the more successful you are.

I guess that would be one way to measure, although I'm not really sure it's the ultimate way to measure. I once did research on a church that baptized nearly a thousand people and yet watched attendance decline that year. Makes me wonder what sort of baptisms were going on. Are you making disciples or just getting people wet?

Still others would say that you should count the church's budget. The bigger the budget, the more the ministries, the greater the good of the church.

Of course people should tithe to their church. And, of course, the budget ought to be able to undergird the ministries and the missions of the church. But we know how God measures gifts. Look at the widow's mite. I'm not sure money is the best means by which to measure the success of a church.

How about beautiful buildings? "The more beautiful the buildings, the better the brethren," they might argue, "who are inside them." Of course, despite the fact that we have one of the most elaborate sanctuaries that I've ever seen – outside of Europe – I know deep down that the house churches in the first century housed the most glorious of saints under simple, thatch roofs. I've worshipped in brush arbors in Uganda where the power of the Spirit was strong and the faith of the people was great.

You think about it. How do you measure a church's greatness? We'll come back to that question.

Turn now to our text, which asks the question, "How can individual believers be great?"

In Luke 9:46-48, we read

And an argument arose among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for he who is least among you, this is the one who is great."

It's an interesting phenomenon in scripture. I don't know if you've ever noticed it or not. When the disciples are arguing over who is the greatest, it usually occurs after Jesus has talked about his role being a suffering servant, talked about his suffering.

Notice what Jesus says in verses 44-45 above

“Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.

Then they argue about the greatness. That happens in scripture. We won't go through all of them, but just so you can see the pattern, turn to Mark 9:31-37. “For he was teaching His disciples and telling them, ‘The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, HE will rise three days later.’ But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house, He began to question them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.”

The story is certainly from the same tradition. Jesus says, “I am going to suffer” – giving the ultimate example of greatness: giving of one's self for others. And they, at the same time he speaks of the sacrificial, suffering servant, are talking about position, power, and prestige.

The first thing I want you to see in this text is

I. Everybody wants to be somebody.

Look at verse 46.

And an argument arose among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

It happens often in some churches, doesn't it? Whenever any project or ministry is launched, people discover that their own ambitions get mixed up with the project. Their feelings get hurt. They want their way or the highway. “I'm the greatest. My ideas are best.”

Everybody wants to be somebody. When you ask the question, “Who's the greatest in the kingdom?” the clear implication is “Am I not the greatest in the kingdom?” That's the real question.

I don't know what it is in your life. Maybe you'd give anything to move just one rung up the ladder at the work place, to sit in your boss's seat. Or maybe you'd do almost anything to be more beautiful. Maybe it would make you happier to be more handsome. We all have those areas in which we strive. What I wouldn't give – maybe exchange everything but my soul – to be a great pulpiteer.

In fact, one Sunday, as I was preaching at the 8:30 service, I looked up and a man who many think is one of the very best preachers in America today – Dr. Joel Gregory, professor of preaching, one time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas – was sitting on the back row beside Robby. He slipped in during one of the songs, I guess – and I didn't see him until I was two-thirds through

the sermon. I looked in that direction again. Could it be? Surely it's not. But it was. All of a sudden I felt like a would-be weekend golfer taking a tee shot as Tiger Woods looks on. For a moment I felt like a child with finger paints at hand while Rembrandt walks up behind me.

So we struggle, we strive – each in our arena of life – clawing to be king of the hill and leaving bloody bodies in our wake. Manipulating and maneuvering ourselves into our long-desired position because everybody wants to be somebody.

But the reality is there is always someone who is better, greater.

II. Jesus uses different means to measure.

The disciples – each implying that he ought to be the greatest in the group – are shocked when Jesus picks a lowly child out of their midst and says, “This is the picture of greatness.”

The argument among the disciples about greatness is ugly and inappropriate. It's comparative and competitive. It diverts praise from God to themselves.

But Jesus measures by a different means. Jesus measures by the means of a child. Jesus teaches lowliness of spirit. Whoever welcomes the lowliest has shown humility appropriate to the kingdom of God.

Everybody wants to fawn over, to extend hospitality and kindness and service to the great. But Jesus says we ought even to offer hospitality to the marginalized of society, to the child – because that's the same as welcoming Jesus. And welcoming Jesus is the same as welcoming God, for in the reign of God there is no selective hospitality.

In the first century, children were essentially non-persons. They were left with women who, themselves, were considered subservient to the men. The children were even further down the social ladder. Only slaves were lower in social standing than children in the first century.

Greatness is a word based on measurement. And Jesus measures with a different means.

The word translated greatness in the text means “more.” It measures more. You see, the disciples were measuring more in the wrong direction. True greatness is not how far we rise above others in status or fame or achievement, but how far we are willing to go down in including and caring for the least and the lowly in Jesus' name.

We feel that if we minister to a significant person, we are, in effect, a significant person ourselves. To minister to the insignificant – let's say, a child – is to have an insignificant ministry and, thus, is equated to being insignificant.

But there is no point in being at Jesus' side unless one is humble enough to be at a child's side. Jesus is saying it doesn't matter to whom we minister because all ministry should be ministry to Christ and for Christ. And to welcome a child is to welcome him. To serve a child is to serve Christ.

We are offered a ministry in church. “Oh, that’s not really the one I had in mind. I wanted to be on this committee or that committee. I really didn’t have in mind that you would want me to do that.”

Jesus ties the word “greatness” to the word “receive” or “welcome.” Welcoming is the act of hospitality. The reception of another as a guest. To give him the sort of things that we enjoy.

It reminds me of the ten-year-old boy who had the opportunity to learn this lesson. He came home one day from school saying his class was collecting canned goods to give to the needy. He wanted to know if he could take some cans from the family’s pantry. His mother told him to help himself, so he started setting out cans of beets and succotash and spinach – and even a can of hominy or two. All things he himself would never want – would have always rejected. His mother came over and added Spaghetti-Os to the pile, and he objected. He liked Spaghetti-Os. Didn’t want to part with those. His mother patiently explained to him something about what it means to be hospitable – accepting the needs of others to be as important as our own needs and offering to others what we, ourselves, value.

Who would treat a child that way? Jesus says that’s the act of greatness. In Mark’s version, Jesus says that if anyone wants to be first, he should be last of all and servant of all.

You measure greatness by how you treat the most marginalized. That’s the new measure.

Jesus doesn’t care anything about how you treat the powerful, the popular, or the prestigious. Jesus cares about how you treat the lowly, the lonely, and the left-out. Everybody wants to rush to the side of the powerful and the influential. No one wants to serve someone he deems less worthy than himself.

Do you notice the paradoxes of Christianity?

- We see unseen things.
- We conquer by yielding.
- We find rest under a yoke.
- We’re exalted by being humble.
- We become wise by being fools for Christ’s sake.
- We are made free by becoming Christ’s bond-servant.
- We possess all things by having nothing.
- We wax strong by being weak.
- We triumph by defeat.
- We find victory by glorifying our infirmities.
- We live by dying.

And to this list we can add “We reign by serving.”

The tombstone of Thomas Jefferson has an epitaph that he wrote himself. It says: “Here is buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statutes of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.” There is no

mention of the fact that he had been governor of Virginia, Minister to France, Secretary of State, and President of the United States. He told his daughter, “The things that are not on my inscription are things the people did for me. The things that are on it are those things that I did for the people.”

Can you imagine being president of the United States and not putting that in your epitaph?

Jesus measures by a different means. He also measures by what we do for others.

III. Children are the choice for the Christ.

Again, we live in a day where, if we're guilty of anything, we're guilty of worshipping our children, of over-indulging them and doting. Delighting in their every move.

In Matthew's gospel we have a story about some children being brought to Jesus so he could lay his hands on them and pray. But even the disciples of Jesus rebuked them, saying something like, “The Master doesn't have time to fool with the children.” And Jesus says, “Let the children alone and do not hinder them from coming to Me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” And after laying his hands on them, he departed from there.

When no one else had time for the children, Jesus had time. When no one else wanted to bless them, he blessed them.

You want to have a great ministry in the eyes of Christ? You have a great ministry in the eyes of the Messiah by receiving and teaching and blessing the children.

Every one of us can remember that Sunday School teacher who made a difference in our lives. That school teacher who had patience with us when no one else did. Who believed in us when the system had long given up. Who took the extra time to explain to us one more time and in one more way.

Want a life that really matters to God? Receive the children. It's like receiving the Christ.

So now we know how Jesus measures our greatness – He measures our greatness by our service to the lowly.

So back to our original question. How do you measure a church?

Remember I said Jesus uses a different means of measure? When we measure a church, we most often measure how many people the church is bringing in. Some one might say, “Oh, that's the largest church in town.”

But may I suggest that the great means of measuring a church might not be how many people they bring in. Rather, it might be how many people they send out.

How many people have gone out from First Baptist Church of Amarillo to minister around the world? How many churches today in how many countries are led by ministers made in these walls? Called from this Christian community? More than we can count, to be sure. Children blessed in this house and sent out.

When you invest your life in the children of this church, you are investing your life in changing the whole world for the cause of Christ. Throughout the years, throughout the ages, First Baptist Church has loved the children. Called the children. Trained the children. And sent them out to change the whole world for the story of Jesus.

Remember those who love the children, those who teach the children – for as they receive the child, they receive the Christ.