

Greatness in the Kingdom

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Preacher: John Wilson

- [0 : 00] Well, before I was studying at ETS, I used to live in London. I was doing a theology degree down there, and I was working at a church in Westminster, and one afternoon, one of my colleagues invited me to go with her to Madame Tussaud's famous wax museum.
- Now, if you've ever been to a wax museum before, you'll know what they're about. But you can go, quite amazing places, you can go and have your photo taken next to your favorite life-sized celebrity.
- And one thing I would notice is that when people were getting their photos taken, you would sometimes see them comparing themselves to their celebrity. I can think of one guy, well, it was me, and he was standing next to Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone at one point.
- And I was looking at Arnold as the Terminator, thinking, you know, I actually don't think he's as big as I thought he was.
- I mean, he's kind of tall. I puffed my chest out a bit, and I thought, you know what? Maybe, maybe just I could take Arnold Schwarzenegger in a fight.
- [1 : 18] I doubt it, but my ego was getting the best of me, and I was comparing myself. And have you ever wondered why we constantly compare ourselves to the lives of others?
- Now, no doubt there are a number of reasons why we do this. Some say we use comparison as a means of measuring our position within a social hierarchy.
- Some say we use comparison as a tool to try and boost our self-esteem. Some say we use comparison as a way to measure our achievements in relation to others.
- We are, after all, very ambitious creatures in the things that matter to us. And we want to be accomplished both in our own estimation and in the estimation of others.
- And we try to measure our greatness with comparison. So, for some people, their sense of greatness comes through sporting achievements in comparison to others.
- [2 : 28] For other people, they measure their greatness by their artistic gifting in comparison to others. For some people, it's their bank balance and possessions in comparison to others.
- For some people, they measure their wealth.
- Their value and their greatness by the extent to which they are well known and loved and appreciated by their local community.
- And at the outset, it needs to be said that there are some incredible benefits to the competition and rivalry that comparison breeds.
- Firstly, studies have shown that our brains literally reward us with serotonin. Think feel-good chemicals when we perceive ourselves as advancing in a social hierarchy.
- [3 : 54] Now, unfortunately, combined with a sinful nature, it's why some people get totally addicted to pursuing power within small communities.
- Secondly, comparison can motivate us to improve ourselves, to better our skills, to improve our performance in order to advance beyond our peers.

The problem comes when we measure our value and our worth and our worth and our esteem by our status and our achievements in relation to others.

This is where comparison can become destructive for a whole number of reasons. Now, comparison and rivalry seems to come naturally to human beings.

And we see it in the Bible that Jesus' students, his disciples, would constantly compare themselves to one another. We read of multiple occasions in the Bible where the disciples would argue with one another about who was the greatest or who was going to be the greatest.

[5 : 13] And do you know what's really interesting? Not once does Jesus actually rebuke them in their aspirations to be great. But rather what Jesus does do is he redefines what constitutes true greatness in the light of God's kingdom.

And he instructs them on how to achieve true and lasting greatness. And as it turns out, we are so very wrong to attach greatness to our social status and our position in relation to others.

So, the big idea this morning is this. I want to encourage you as individuals and as a church to pursue greatness.

To pursue greatness as Jesus defines it. But also to alert you this evening to the pitfalls of constantly comparing ourselves to others in order to measure our status and our worth.

And this can happen at both an individual level and an ecclesial level. So, a good question to ask at the outset of this evening is, who or what are you busy comparing yourself to?

[6 : 47] And the first point is this. This is the longest point. Constantly comparing ourselves to others will never lead to lasting greatness as Jesus defines it.

For many people in the world today, as in the time of Jesus, the way to achieve greatness is to exalt themselves over others. And that is certainly what James and John, the so-called sons of thunder, tried to do to the rest of the disciples.

Now, Jesus had formally told the disciples in Matthew's Gospel, again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

So, the sons of thunder, they took up Jesus' promise to ask whatever they wanted, but they didn't use it for the benefit of others, but to exalt themselves over the others.

According to their understanding of what it meant to be great, they wanted to have the highest status.

[8 : 17] Top dogs at the table. To lord it over the others with whom they were busy comparing themselves to and arguing over who was the greatest. They were hungry for status.

They were hungry for power within God's community. In short, they wanted to be seen as great. And it was the pursuit of greatness that was fueling their self-exaltation.

Mark chapter 10, verses 35 to 37, Now, from Mark's account, as we've read this evening, they appear to be quite assertive towards Jesus to try and control the outcome and acquire the greatness that they desire.

Because they just kind of come straight out with this request. Confident that they are worthy. And in Matthew's account, their own mother gets involved to affirm them.

It kind of reminds me of those pushy parents years ago on the early days of Pop Idol and The X Factor. A young person would go into the audition room.

[9 : 50] They maybe didn't do so well. And then the angry parent would come in and start shouting at Simon Cowell to tell the judges why their child is in fact an absolute superstar and deserves to be up there on the stage in front of the world.

Why the world deserves to see their greatness. Now, one of the programs that Anna and I like to watch every year, I don't think it was on last year, but it was, you've heard of it, it's called The Apprentice on the BBC.

And if you haven't heard of The Apprentice on the BBC, well, this is a show where candidates try to prove to Sir Alan Sugar that they have what it takes to be his next business partner.

And if you've ever watched this show, you might say that self-exaltation is the name of the game. Often at the expense of genuine competency and proficiency, all the while belittling and making small the achievements of the other candidates.

It doesn't matter how competent or worthy of being Sir Alan's business partner you actually are, this is a dog-eat-dog environment.

[11 : 03] Go in with humility, go in low, and you are toast. You won't last long. And you know there are groups today that provide assertiveness training in order to help people climb the career ladder faster, get a better paid job faster, and a promotion in their chosen career or profession.

Never mind actually acquiring the necessary skills, experience, and competence to do a job well for your boss, as long as you can play the role, as long as you can appear assertive, appear confident, appear authoritarian, take command over others, you can climb that ladder.

And James and John, they want to be exalted. They talk a big game. They want the status. But are they actually able to do the necessary things that would lead to such a status in God's kingdom?

To sit at the left hand and the right hand of the King of Kings in His glory. And Jesus says to them, you don't know what you're asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized with? And the question, of course, is not for Jesus' benefit.

[12 : 43] It is rhetorical. This question points to Jesus' atoning sacrifice that He will make on behalf of the nation. But they miss the point.

Because their vision of greatness is skewed. They want the glory of militaristic martyrdom. But Jesus' glory would be supremely displayed through His sacrificial suffering on a cross for His enemies.

And they respond, we can. We can do it. Very bold. So what is it that makes a person great in the kingdom of God?

What does Jesus teach about true greatness? Well, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says in chapter 18, three to four, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And in chapter 23, 12, for those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

[14 : 04] And those who humble themselves will be exalted. And so here we see that Jesus teaches that true greatness, i.e. greatness in the kingdom of heaven, is achieved through humility, humility, not self-exaltation.

Mark 10, 42, Jesus called them together and said, you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them, but not so with you.

Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So here we have Jesus teaching that true greatness comes through servitude. And so fixated were John and James and the rest of the disciples in comparing themselves to each other, arguing over who was the greatest, that Jesus needed to correct their understanding of what actually constituted greatness in the eyes of God.

Humility, not exaltation. So that was our first point. Constantly comparing our lives to others will never lead to lasting greatness as Jesus defines it.

[15 : 46] Point number two. constantly comparing our lives to others is making us miserable.

In his book, *All Grown Up*, Paul Agnion identifies what he calls obsessive comparative disorder. Now, for anyone here this evening, if you struggle with OCD, which is a serious mental health struggle that many people struggle with, this may sound a bit insensitive, but that's not what he's referring to when he calls it obsessive comparative disorder.

He sarcastically writes, the key to success is comparing yourself to everyone, every day.

Then let that anxiety and that fear propel you to work harder, faster, with more motivation. And then he signs it off with, guy who had a nervous breakdown at 27.

Comparative disorder is our compulsion in our contemporary society to constantly compare ourselves with others, producing unwanted thoughts and feelings that drive us to depression, consumption, anxiety, and all-round joyous discontent.

[17 : 16] He says, we used to have to wait for a school reunion before comparing ourselves to others. Now we get to live that experience out every day, over and over, through social media.

You see, the comparison that fuels our self-exaltation is making us miserable. But friends, there is amazing news tonight. Incredible good news.

And this is why the gospel is just so amazing, because it speaks into all areas of our life. Jesus offers us freedom from the debilitating effects of obsessive comparative disorder.

If we would just grasp his vision for greatness. You see, it is not wrong to want to be great, to want to achieve great things, but we have to do it Jesus' way.

true humility. David Brooks said this, he's a social commentator in the USA, but he says, true humility is the freedom from the need to prove that you are superior.

[18 : 35] Jesus wants you to be free from the need to constantly compare yourselves to others in order to measure your value and your worth.

But rather, he wants you to find your value and your worth in God, who created you and who gave his one and only Son for you, to redeem you.

Christian, Jesus taught that John the Baptist was the greatest human being that has ever lived, of those born among women.

But even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. When you understand your identity, when you understand that as the least in the kingdom of heaven, you are already greater than any human being who has ever lived on earth, you are free to let go of comparing yourselves to others.

That's freedom. And constantly comparing our lives to others in order to validate our status is making us miserable, both in our individual lives and as a society.

[20 : 10] Because, let's face it, there is always someone more talented. There is always someone better looking. There is always someone more accomplished.

There is always a more skilled gardener. There is always someone who is a better cook. Always someone who is greater in the world's eyes.

So who or what are you busy comparing yourself to? And when it's all been said and done, will such comparing lead to joy everlasting?

The momentary joy that comes from being great in the world's estimation, it's fleeting. Don't settle for it. Because Jesus has a different standard for you and I.

an example which he himself has set for even the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[21 : 19] True greatness comes in servitude. And to love and to serve our Lord and to serve his people, serve one another in all humility.

It's not a suggestion, it's not good advice, it's not even a good idea, it is a directive and a command from our commander-in-chief, the Lord Jesus Christ. And to obey him in this will not only lead to full and lasting joy, but greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

So who or what are you busy comparing yourself to? Point number three, constantly comparing ourselves to others, it distracts us from listening to and hearing the words of Jesus.

I wonder particularly for the younger generation how much time we spend on social media. Comparing our lives to our friends when we could be serving others in our Bibles, I'm talking about myself as if I'm a young guy, I'm not that young, but comparing ourselves to others when we could be sitting at the feet of Jesus, reading our Bibles, learning, growing, in fellowship with other Christians, the danger of comparison is that we stop listening to Jesus.

Now I've often read in the Gospels after the death of Christ where the disciples are amazed at what's happened, and of course they should be. Resurrection doesn't just happen, it's amazing.

[23 : 01] But on the other hand, they've already seen Lazarus raised from the dead, and this is the third time in Mark's Gospel where Jesus is explicit that he's going to be handed over to the Gentiles, he's going to be flogged, he's going to be mocked, he's going to be crucified, and so he did tell them that this was going to happen.

So Jesus has just been telling them how he's going to be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes that they'll condemn him to death, deliver him over to the Gentiles, pouring his heart out.

Imagine I come to you and I tell you what's going to happen to me, that something bad is going to happen to me, that I'm going to be tortured, and I'm going to be crucified, and they just come out with, yeah, can you do us a favor?

all they are concerned with is apparently who is going to be the greatest. So busy were James and John in comparing themselves to others that they failed to hear what Jesus was actually saying to them.

is your ambition or comparison to others, that thing that is taking up all your time, gripping all of your heart, is it stopping you from hearing the words of Jesus, hearing what he has to say?

[24 : 37] because here it's like the disciples are deaf to what he's telling them explicitly. Point number four, I've actually got five, pushing the boat out, constantly comparing ourselves to others, it distracts us from walking with Jesus.

When you read the Gospel of John, you get the impression sometimes that there is perhaps a wee bit of a rivalry going on between the disciples Peter and John.

John feels it necessary to mention this seemingly insignificant detail that on the way to the empty tomb, he happened to outrun Peter. It's like he's saying, just so you know, I'm faster than Peter.

But equally, Peter's rivalry with John threatens to distract Peter from the path that Jesus would have him walk. After Jesus restores Peter on the beach and they're having breakfast, Jesus tells Peter, very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you dressed yourself and you went where you wanted.

But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you to where you do not want to go. And Jesus, we're told, said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.

[26 : 08] And church tradition tells us that Peter was crucified upside down. And then Jesus said to him, follow me.

Now if I was Peter and I heard Jesus tell me that, because I know what I'm like, I would probably have a few more questions. But what does Peter do?

Peter turns and he sees the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him?

What about him? Well, this is going to happen to me. What about him? And Jesus answers, Peter, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what's that to you?

You follow me. Constantly comparing ourselves to others can distract us from walking with Jesus and the path Jesus would have for us.

[27 : 27] He's got good things for us to do. Work's prepared in advance. Point number five, last point. Constantly comparing ourselves to others leads to idolatry.

Tim Keller, very famous Presbyterian preacher, I'm sure many of you have heard of him. He says, our need for worth is so powerful that whatever we base our identity and our value on, we essentially deify.

In other words, we make it a God. We will look to it with all the passion, all the intensity of worship and devotion, even if we think of ourselves as highly irreligious.

constantly comparing ourselves to others leads to idolatry. There is good news.

We're good news people. We're all about the good news. The good news is that Jesus understands our need for greatness and worth.

[28 : 45] there is such a thing as godly ambition. And you don't need to constantly compare yourself to others because Jesus has made you infinitely worthy, even when you weren't.

You don't need to compare yourselves to others in order to be great. the path to greatness is humility, not in comparing our lives to others.

Jesus wants you to be great. Jesus wants you to be free from obsessive comparative disorder that your joy might be full in God.

And Jesus commands that we stop comparing our story to others and that we follow him. You follow me, he says to Peter.

You follow me, he says to you. And that means you don't have to bust a gut seeking the approval of others because in Christ you have been approved by God.

[30 : 08] You have been approved by the one person whose opinion really matters. you are his workmanship.

And Christian, if you are someone here this evening and you struggle with low self-esteem, of course there are positive steps you can take for this, but know that increasing your self-esteem will not lead to greatness, only self-worship.

Your worth is not found in comparing yourself, it is found in God who alone has loved you and redeemed you. Find your esteem in him, find your worth in him, find your value in him.

And so there is a call to repentance this evening. Who or what have you been comparing yourself to?

has it been robbing you of your joy in Christ? Is it taking up all of your time, your energy, your devotion, your worship?

[31 : 26] Is it distracting you from living out your own God-given story? Because at the end of the day, when everything has been said and done, the number of Facebook likes and approvals won't matter.

Your comparative status in the world, it won't matter. Your bank balance won't matter. Your comparative happiness and contentment and the number of holidays you go on each year compared to your neighbour, it won't matter.

Your crowning achievements in comparison to others won't matter. All that will matter on that day is Christ. I want to share with you the words from the hymn.

We're not going to sing this this evening because I don't think it was available, but it's a fantastic hymn by the Gettys. I think it was a collaboration with Graham Kendrick. And it says, My worth is not in what I own, it's not in the strength of flesh and bone, but in the costly wounds of love at the cross.

My worth is not in skill or name, in win or lose, in pride or shame, but in the blood of Christ that flowed at the cross.

[32 : 54] As summer flowers we fade and die, fame, youth, beauty, hurry by, but life eternal calls to us at the cross.

I will not boast in wealth or might or human wisdom's fleeting light, but I will boast in knowing Christ at the cross.

Two wonders here, I confess, my worth and my unworthiness, my value fixed, my ransom paid at the cross.

I rejoice in my Redeemer, greatest treasure, wellspring of my soul, and I will trust in Him, no other. My soul is satisfied in Him alone.

Amen. vadå Peter Demon David Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 01] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.