

If you want to stand out; stand down and serve.

Tonight I want to start with a question? Who wants to be great? Who here wants to be the greatest; you want to be the best? Better than anyone else? Better than the best? The best of the best? Who here is ambitious?

It almost feels wrong to answer that right? It feels shameful to say "Yea that's me".

Is it ok to be competitive? Is it ok to stand out?

Competition is almost the dark side of human life. Is it ok to be competitive with other people? Do you want to be the best. We use people as the benchmark. What happens when you are the best in the world? You have no one else to compare yourself with?

If you have any drive, you have to hide it. "I'm all about Jesus, but I want to stand out". Where do we get this idea from?

Philippians 2:3

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit

We read this and immediately we decide that ambition, the desire to stand out is wrong. Except the scripture actually says do nothing out of vain conceit or selfish ambition. It doesn't say do nothing out of ambition, it says do nothing out of selfish ambition. So if it's only selfish ambition that is the problem then ambition is actually a virtue, it's something good, something worth having.

Even when we think that ambition is a good thing, have you heard people say; "Just be careful, don't be too ambitious" - this gives us an insight in that we think that ambition isn't a good thing.

Have you ever had somebody say; "Don't be too loving, keep a little hate" / "Don't be too forgiving, a little bitterness will keep you protected" / "Don't have too much integrity, gotta have a little corruption - or your not going to enjoy life". Whatever we consider to be a virtue we never same don't have too much of that. But if we don't consider ambition to be a good thing, we think it's wrong, that it's bad.

But what does the bible have to say?

Sometimes the words of Jesus can appear to trip us up, but the reality is it's the way in which we interpret the words of Jesus that trips us up.

Matthew 20:20 [NIV]

20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

21 "What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

22 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

23 Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. **25** Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **26** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— **28** just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is an amazing scenario. You have two brothers John and James or James and John and they are the sons of Zebedee. Jesus has nicknamed them "the sons of thunder" - as far as nicknames go this is pretty much one of the best ever, if you're going to have a nickname this is up there. Who wouldn't love being known as the sons of thunder? I am so taken with it I'm tempted to start referring to my boys as this.

Anyway you the sons of thunder and they want something, but they are too afraid to ask? Who's been there? In the playground aged 6, too afraid to ask so you send someone else. Well the sons of thunder they sent their mummy.

Here are these 2 rugged men, the sons of thunder, they send their mummy to Jesus to ask if they can have a special place in Jesus' kingdom. "Can one of my sons sit on your right and the other on the left? I don't want to be too imposing so I'll let you decide who sits where".

Then Jesus without even acknowledging her look straight past her and locks eyes with the two boys standing behind her, i imagine looking a little sheepish, and answers them.

Jesus begins to unravel what it is they are asking.

We all want greatness but we don't necessarily want sacrifice. We want the outcome of greatness but we don't want the process of greatness. We want the instalife, not the real life.

Jesus is saying to James and John. "do you understand that you are asking for a level of greatness that you may not be willing to sacrifice?"

They say no no we understand.

Jesus begins to piece together a new frame for greatness.

However verse 24 is interesting. It says "When the others heard this, they were indignant with the two brothers".

Indignant - feeling or showing anger or annoyance at what is perceived as unfair treatment. They were resentful, disgruntled, unhappy, offended, annoyed.

Have you ever been indignant? We are indignant when someone else does what we wanted to do.

"Can you believe HE asked HER out?", "Did you see them pull into that parking space I was waiting for?", "Did you see they got MY job?" "Can you believe they wore those shoes with that outfit?".

There is a job promotion and we are hoping that someone will just see us, the boss will recognise what we are doing, but someone has the audacity to go to them and say they are right for the job. We are indignant.

The disciples were indignant because they asked for what they wanted.

Then Jesus begins to give them a different framework for greatness.

25 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **26** Not so with you.

See Jesus isn't telling them not to pursue greatness, to not have ambition, to not want to stand out, He is actually telling them you have the wrong model of greatness, the wrong plan for ambition, the wrong path to stand out.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

And this is the part that we all catch on to, in order to stand out; to be great; to be like Jesus we must become servants. We know that - to many of you this won't be revolutionary. But here is the problem, we just slide right past the first half of Jesus' instruction. He says;

If ANYONE wants to be GREAT...

So the second half doesn't even apply to us if we don't want to be great. So many of us skip over that and got to the servant part because we were taught or have confused apathy for servanthood.

Jesus says "I want to teach you how to be great" but this only applies to the person who wants to be great.

The desire in you to stand out, to be great is not an accident. If we are not ambitious then we are actually apathetic.

We have landed on this idea that we are here to float through life, to be nice Godly people, tolerant of others, never rocking the boat, taking care of ourselves. We have become indifferent, uninterested, passive to a world desperate for truth and reality.

But that wasn't and isn't Jesus.

See Jesus doesn't want to make you weak, He wants to make you powerful. He wants to make you the kind of servant that Pastor Ed Wells was talking about a few weeks ago. A servant who knows they could rule but they choose to serve.

Jesus wants to teach us how to be great, it's just we don't believe that the path to greatness is servanthood. We have come to the conclusion that Jesus must be against greatness because He is for servanthood. Jesus isn't trying to move us away from greatness to servanthood, rather He is trying to lead us to greatness through servanthood.

27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Do we understand that Jesus is the greatest servant who ever lived? We also have to understand that Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived. Jesus accomplished the greatest mission the world has ever seen, there was no one more ambitious than Jesus. He didn't just come to save one, or a few, he came to save us all, and not just our generation, but generation, after generation, after generation, after generation. He came to save humanity.

And the only way that that level of greatness could be achieved was to step into the greatest level of humility and serve. The creator chose to serve his creation.

And what of us? If we are to be truly great how do we go about this?

1. Understand the sacrifice - Jesus states **“and whoever wants to be first must be your slave”** In truth I think we all love to be first right? We all love to be number one. We all want to be the one who is at the head of the pack, there is this sense of competition within us, even if it's just a little, it's there.

But in Jesus' new framework, He highlights that if we wish to be first we must choose to be your slave; to be a servant of all. To minister. I'm not sure we like the idea of a slave, it gives an image of someone without choice, a person with no freedom, but actually if we look at the word Jesus uses it means to serve or to minister; to attend to the needs of someone; to take care of; to help, assist, to look after. Jesus isn't trying to remove our freedom but rather He is encouraging us to lay down our agendas, our plans and our futures and take up a cause so much greater than our own, one which is far more rewarding, and with a far greater impact than we could ever imagine.

Daniel, rather than get angry with his captives, chose service and in so doing served 4 different kings; David served as a shepherd, which prepared him to serve as a warrior which prepared him to become King. After Pentecost the disciples did not return to their businesses, their old lives, but rather they went out to preach the gospel to the 4 corners of the earth. They took what Jesus had shown them to the world - they lived lives of service – their sacrifice was our gain.

Paul sums it up well in 1 Corinthians 9:19 [NIV]

19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

Paul's motivation, his desire was to win as many as possible, to see others encounter a life changing relationship with Jesus, but it started with choosing to sacrifice, laying down his agenda, his plan and picking up Jesus' mission. And it's not like this wasn't tested, I bet there

were days when Paul wanted nothing more than to throw in the towel, maybe sometime after being shipwrecked again, but he chose to serve, even when it didn't suit him.

We too must choose to understand the sacrifice. If we desire to be great, we need to understand that we must daily choose to lay down our agenda and rather pick up the plan of Jesus. Not just on a Sunday but first thing on a Monday when we just want to lay in bed, last thing on a Friday when we just want to get home; when that person cuts us up in traffic, whether we're feeling it or not; in good times and bad; we must choose to choose to serve. (Power of just showing up) And in doing so we may just win some people for Jesus; we may just see our colleagues; families; course mates; lecturers; neighbours finding life in Jesus. We may just find that person we have been praying for coming to know Jesus. Who knows, we may just begin to see our city, our county, our nation coming to know Him.

2. Understand the process – Throughout this account in Matthew Jesus is introducing the disciples to this new framework for greatness, but He is also introducing them to a new way of living. See how He draws their attention to the ways of their day;

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you.”

The rulers of the time chose to Lord it over the people, they burdened people, and asserted authority, people lived restricted, and bound by those in authority - who knows that this is the last thing that society needs today. People don't need their mistakes highlighted; they don't need to be reminded of their failures or shortcomings. Jesus words “Not so with you” are so refreshing, so freeing.

Jesus is teaching the disciples that servanthood was what they were being called to. It wasn't and isn't how the world would regard greatness but in His world it is. They were to live devoted to Jesus, a life submitted to His plan, to serve His agenda and to serve according to His principles.

Romans 12 gives us a great insight into this;

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. **2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The message puts it this way;

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

God desires us to live life based not on the pattern of this world; not based upon the status quo, not according to what media or peer groups tell us or show us, not to live so well-adjusted but rather to live according to His principles and His promises. We are to focus our attention upon Him, on what He says, even when it seems totally crazy to do so, we are to keep living according to Him and as we do God brings out the best in us, brings about His good, pleasing and perfect will.

3. Understand the reality – In the Instagram era that we live in it can be so difficult to ascertain what's real and what's fake. Social media doesn't represent truth, it sells illusions; warps our realities and twists our expectations. We are being sold a lie and our world is giving all they have to buy it. So many people are chasing after a reality they can never have.

Never before has truth and integrity become more necessary and fundamental than it has today.

Ghandi once said;

If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today.

The world is looking for truth, it is searching for reality and we can show them the answer, but the way in which we live will be key. In the world in which we operate there is no room for falsehood, no room for fakeness, no room for a hidden or secret life. We must live life based firmly on integrity, and honesty. We must constantly move toward developing our character, growing in ambition and desire, we must become more like Jesus. We must choose to reveal Jesus to those around us, through the way in which we live; the way we act and conduct our lives.

William Temple (no relation to Phil) former Archbishop of Canterbury once said;

"It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear, and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it; I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it; I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like His."

If we can live our lives understanding the sacrifice, understanding the process that we are here to follow Jesus and understanding the reality that we can live like Christ then we truly can live a life of greatness. A life of ambition; a life that stands out; that serves others and sees them encounter a life-changing God. A life caught in the craziest and most ambitious mission that this world has ever seen.

Greatness is found through serving. If you want to stand out: stand down & SERVE.