



Becoming Great, Like Jesus

The Evangelical Covenant Church accomplishes a lot of ministry for being a relatively small (albeit growing) movement of churches. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, jokes that “the Covenant fights above its weight class.”

Still, my hope for the church goes beyond what we do, to who we are. I want to be part of something great—we all do. I just want Jesus to define greatness for us.

Some time ago it was pointed out to me that Jesus uses the word *great* three times in the Gospel of Matthew—once is in conjunction with obedience, a second related to humility, and the third in connection with the servant-heart. When you combine all three usages, who is great in the kingdom of God? The obedient, humble servant. Groups take on a collective character. I hope that is ours.

Obedience is the first mark. Jesus talks about the law, the Torah, the word of God. He says in Matthew 5:19, “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (TNIV). This is the admonition to make the wisdom of God our defining frame of reference for life. At the core, obedience isn’t some deadening form of self-denial; it is simply aligning our hearts with the mind, wisdom, and promises of God.

Proverbs 4:13 says, “Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life” (TNIV). That proverb recognizes that the wisdom of God is life-giving. Obedience is about believing the trustworthiness of God to instruct us in life-giving ways, not life-stifling ways.

But we live in a day and age that prefers its gods to be permissive and validating. If God doesn’t want what we want, then God must be punitive and suppressive. No. It is precisely because of God’s love that God seeks to both steer us away from things that are corrosive to the soul and toward the pastures that protect and nourish. Every time we obey by letting go of some action, we affirm that we believe in the life-giving goodness of God. And every time we obey by leaving behind inaction, we affirm the same.

The second usage of *great* relates to humility. In Matthew 18:4 Jesus says, “Whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the

greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (TNIV). Humility stands in that childlike place, amazed at all God can do, mindful of what we cannot do, and trusting in God’s wise bestowment.

Author Mike Yaconelli observed, “The power of the church is not a parade of flawless people, but a flawless Christ who embraces our flaws. The church is not made up of the whole people but rather of the broken people who find wholeness in a Christ who was broken for us.”

I have a collection of roosters in my office. They remind me of the story of the rooster who came to believe that his crowing was responsible for making the sun rise. The rooster began taking credit for something it was only supposed to call attention to. When we begin to take credit for the things God is doing, pride swells, and a fall awaits.

Humility recognizes that every good gift, beginning with grace, comes from above. Humility lives in a posture of perpetual thankfulness, whispering, “God, look what you did.”

The final time Jesus uses the word *great* is in Matthew 20:26. He says, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (TNIV). The third mark of greatness is the servant-heart. The best definition of the servant-heart I have heard is this: the servant seeks the advantage of the other party. Anyone in any relationship, regardless of the power balance, can live by that principle. What is to the advantage of the one in front of me? A parent to a child, an employer to an employee, two friends, two people in strife—anyone can ask what it means to seek the other’s advantage. That doesn’t always mean we agree on what that is, but it does mean we value the relationship enough to place their interest above our own. So doing will find more common ground than broken ground.

Klyne Snodgrass, professor of New Testament at North Park Theological Seminary, wrote, “To be a disciple of the kingdom means hearing and remaining focused on the message of the kingdom in such a way that one is defined by it.” In being defined by the kingdom, may we be characterized as obedient, humble servants. That’s who we are at our best. ■

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