

What makes a great leader? Who do you think is a great person? Some people have the word “great” attached to their name. You may have heard of Alexander the Great was a ruler of the Greek kingdom of Macedon. He led his army across Africa and Asia 300 years before Christ. He created one of the largest empires in world history from Greece to India. Why was he called “the” great? I guess it was because he built a large empire and dominated much of the world. Then there was a queen called Catherine the Great. She was the empress of Russia for 34 years in the 1700’s. Why? Because Russia flourished under her reign. She is revered as Russia’s greatest female leader. Muhammed Ali claimed to be the greatest at least when it came to boxing. He publically challenged his opponents and in his prime was never defeated in the boxing ring.

But are the only great people those who rule empires or those who can knock out their opponents with a punch? Not at all. Think for a moment of great people in your life. Who is on that list? With them in mind, what makes them great in your eyes? What is it about them? What characteristics do they have? But what about you? Would you consider yourself a great person? Some of us might say “yes.” But most of us would likely say “no, we’re just ordinary people.” But did you know that Jesus might actually see you as great? How could that be?

That’s what we’re going to explore today as we return to the Gospel of Matthew. We were going through Matthew before Easter. We learned that Matthew 21-the first part of 28 focused on the final week of Jesus’ life. We had to skip ahead to chapters 26-28 so we could do the Easter passages at Easter. They contain Matthew’s detailed account of the betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. But we had to skip chapters 23-25. So we have to rewind. Matthew 21 started with the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Then Jesus cleansed the temple driving out those who sold, bought, and exchanged money. The religious rulers challenged Jesus’ authority to do this. After he exposes their own hypocrisy, Jesus tells 3 parables. He talks about how the kingdom of heaven will be taken away from the religious leaders and given to those who produce fruits. The religious leaders respond by trying to to entrap Jesus with hard questions. They eventually give up because Jesus responds brilliantly.

Now we enter into Matthew 23-25. Chapters 24 and 25 contain Jesus’ teaching on the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the end times. But before that, Jesus teaches about 2 groups of religious leaders who were considered “great.” At that time – the scribes and the Pharisees. Here we will see Jesus expose some realities about these religious

leaders that the people needed to know. Part of His reason for doing this is to prepare them for the earth shattering change that will come to their culture and faith. In just over 35 years, the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed, the religious leadership scattered and Judaism itself will face deep soul searching.

So Jesus wants to help the people and His disciples prepare for that time. They will need to change their understanding of greatness. As we discover Jesus' definition of greatness, I pray the Holy Spirit will both encourage and empower us to the type of greatness Jesus talks about. Our text is Matthew 23:1-12 if you want to find that in your own Bibles or devices. It's also on page 697 in the Bibles in front of you.

Matthew 23:1-12 (ESV)

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Who does Jesus recognize as having true greatness?

Jesus has just completed his final encounter with some Pharisees. He stumped them with a question. Matthew 22 ends with the statement “And no one was able to answer him a word nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” Now Jesus turns His attention to the crowds and his disciples.

He talks about the Scribes and the Pharisees. Who were they?

The scribes could read and write. They wrote up legal documents for people like lawyers do today. Since Israelite religious laws were intimately tied to its civil laws they got to know God's laws pretty well. So scribes had a prominent and important role to play in the community.

The word Pharisee may come from a term meaning “specifiers,” those exact in the law. But most scholars associate the term with a root implying separatists. They were serious about God's law and were not willing to make compromises when it came to God's Word. Many earnestly and honestly wanted to figure out how to apply God's law to everyday life. The problem came with their interpretation of the law. Their interpretations grew to become a massive

collection of literature and thought. It's kind of like notes in a Study Bible. Now there's nothing wrong with Study Bibles. They can help us better connect to the Bible's text. But we must remember all Study Bible notes are someone's interpretation. They're helpful but they're not Scripture. I like to joke a little with people if they would mind reading out their inspired study Bible notes to us.

But imagine if on top of the Bible which is a work itself, we had to learn and live by all the study notes? The Pharisees and Scribes provided a huge collection study notes. Since they did not write down many of their interpretations, a large oral law developed. Only the professionals like the Pharisees knew them extensively. So the people tried to abide by God's law. Then the Pharisees added their interpretation. Soon, this became a massive collection of law that weighed down the people.

But just before we look at Jesus' words about them, we need to think about our own attitude toward the Pharisees. When we hear the word Pharisee, we immediately think negatively about them. Jesus calls them hypocrites again and again in the later part of chapter 23. But before we're too hard on them, we must recognize we have a lot in common with them. They were serious about God's Word. They wanted to figure out how to live each day in ways that pleased God. They thought they were doing God's will. Many were very sincere and earnest in carrying out their duties. But the system they set up went too far. To really get back to only God's Word, they would have to dismantle an entire religious system upon which many of them depended for their livelihoods.

Now let's turn to Jesus' words. He begins with some possibly complimentary words about the Scribes and Pharisees. "They sit on Moses' seat so do and observe what they tell you." Moses founded Judaism and gave the Israelites God's law. So to sit on Moses' seat may mean they had teaching authority or they had responsibility for teaching and interpreting the Law of Moses. Jesus acknowledges "they have this authority." But he highlights the problem at the end of verse 3. But don't observe and do what they do. For they preach but they do not practice. They taught their interpretation of the law. But in some way they didn't live up to it or they missed more important parts of God's law. Then Jesus describes the impact their teaching had upon the people in verse 4. "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." So the image is one of the Scribe or Pharisee tying up a heavy backpack or piece of luggage. They load it onto the

shoulders of the person. But they don't lift a finger to help that person carry this load. Not lifting a finger indicates an unwillingness to make the slightest effort to help.

Now think for a moment about the phrase "heavy burden." Can you think of another time in Matthew when Jesus talks about a heavy load? How about we go back to Matthew 11:28-30. What does Jesus say there? "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Unlike tying up heavy burdens, Jesus' yoke is easy and light. Unlike a refusal to lift a finger, Jesus invites people to come and learn from him. The Pharisees burdened people with their interpretations. Jesus unburdened them with His teaching. These great leaders were not so great in Jesus' eyes.

So the first answer to the question "Who does Jesus recognize as having true greatness? **23:1-4 - Not those who try to control others through demands, rules, intimidation and pressure.** The Scribes and Pharisees made demands and imposed rules on the people. They aimed to control them by teaching, reminding and rebuking them. Some may have used their positions of power to intimidate and pressure the people into obedience. But Jesus does not recognize this approach as part of true greatness.

Think about people we might call great today. Might some of them control people through demands, rules, intimidation and pressure? I remember talking with someone one time about a famous pastor. This person admired this pastor for their speaking ability and influence. But this pastor faced difficulties in their church because staff members and congregants complained of bullying tactics and intimidation. I remember the person I talked to thought these complaints were irrelevant. What did it matter if the pastor was an effective speaker and the church grew? Yet, controlling people and getting them to move by loading them down with intimidation or pressure is not Christ's way. Jesus makes this clear in this first part of His speech.

Now can you imagine that crowd and the disciples hearing Jesus say this on that day? Many of them probably approved but were worried about how the great people might respond. But Jesus goes on in verses 5-7. Who does Jesus recognize as having true greatness? **23:5-7 - Not those who revel in social status especially about their walk with God.** Verse 5 – "They do all their deeds to be seen by others." Why do people do some things to be seen by others? Sometimes it's for positive reasons. But Jesus is talking about negative reasons. They want something from the others.

It may be praise, recognition, favor or honor. How many likes did you get on your post? How many comments? How many followers do you have?

These Pharisees and Scribes had unique ways of drawing attention to themselves. One was to make broad phylacteries – not factories – phylacteries. These were little boxes containing passages of Scripture written on parchment. They arose in response to Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 6. He says “these words I command you shall be on your heart. And in verse 8 Moses says “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” So to symbolize that they were taking God’s law seriously they would put these phylacteries literally between their eyes on their forehead. If you have something on your forehead, it is constantly in your eyesight and reminds you that it’s there. There’s nothing wrong with that symbol. But apparently some of the Pharisees made their boxes bigger on their foreheads. Then people would see and apparently remark, “My, what a big phylactery you have. How holy and pious you must be.”

The tassels on their garments reminded the people to obey God’s commandment and to be holy to God. But if you wanted to be really holy, you would have longer tassels. This was happening because Jesus points it out to the people.

But not only did these Pharisees dress in a way to gain social status, they clamored for prominent places at social or religious events. So they wanted a seat at the head table during a banquet. Or they wanted the best seat in the synagogue like maybe sitting on our platform so everyone could see them and recognize them as that community leader.

But Jesus sees through all this. It’s not wrong to have a good seat at a banquet or sit on the platform as long as you don’t seek that and elbow your way into it. Jesus does not see greatness in those who revel in and pursue social status. He demonstrated that by spending most of his time with those who had no social status. He calls us to the same practice. We’re not to seek honor or clamor to get near to the famous so we can raise our own social status. That’s not greatness in his eyes. It comes from something very different as we will see in a moment. But just before we arrive there, Jesus points out one more negative example of true greatness.

Who does Jesus recognize as having true greatness? **23:8-10 - Not those who enjoy recognition for their titles, degrees or letters behind their name.** Jesus points out in verse 7 how the scribes and Pharisees loved greetings in the

market place and being called rabbi. Now when I first read that, I thought “what’s the big deal about receiving the greeting rabbi? Aren’t there lots of rabbis?” Well, today there are a significant number of rabbis. But apparently in Jesus’ day there were only a few who got the title Rabbi. You needed to have a school of thought or a significant group of disciples to have that name. So to be called rabbi was a title of respect.

But look at what Jesus does with this in verse 8. “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher.” Now that’s a dramatic shift in the discipleship culture of that day. If you were a disciple of a rabbi in those days, you dreamed about becoming a rabbi yourself one day with your own disciples. But there would be no more supreme rabbis in the kingdom of heaven. There would be one teacher – Jesus Christ. Everyone else would be brothers and sisters. Everyone is a disciple of Christ.

Then comes strange verse 9. “And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven.” What is Jesus saying? We’re not allowed to call our dads “father?” No, Jesus is not saying that. How could it mean that especially in light of the 5th commandment? Honor your father and mother. It seems by mentioning this Jesus exposes some prominent Pharisees or Scribes who accepted the title “father,” as if they were somehow “father” over the people. But God was the only Father of the whole nation.

Nor were they to covet the title “instructor.” From now on they would have one instructor – the Christ. So Jesus moves the disciples and the people away from trusting in the leadership of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Yet, they will still need leaders. So who will be the truly great leaders? Verse 11 and 12 – The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Who does Jesus regard as truly great? **23:11-12 - Those who have a servant heart and humble attitude.** The truly great are not those with social status and impressive titles. They are not those who lay heavy burdens on people to accomplish their great project. They are those who are willing to serve.

Think about the existence of a servant. A servant lived to care for, protect and make better the lives of those over him or her. So in God’s kingdom servant leadership means to care for, protect and make better the lives of those under him/her. And a servant cares for and shows concern for those around them. To serve means to arrange your life with the ambition of giving yourself for the benefit of others. Humility involves a willingness to not put ourselves forward as better or greater but to simply serve quietly and behind the scenes if necessary.

What does this serving and humble attitude look like? We saw an example of that in our church family last Sunday on this spot. The chair of our Elders stood here. He acknowledged his own weakness. He recognized his own need to continue to grow in loving community and humble service to one another. If you were not here last Sunday, would you please find 34 minutes and 34 seconds to listen to that message? I believe it is a timely, honest and humble challenge to us all.

I saw another example of this in a note I received this week from someone caring for their aging parent. *My parent is doing ok. They're having some more physical problems. We just need to have time and patience with them. That part of the walk in this valley has been very enlightening for me. I really enjoy slowing down with my parent and tending to their needs. It's not easy, by any means, but it's serving my parent in a way that I know honours them and God. That brings me some peace and even a sort of joy - deep, inner joy.*

A servant heart comes through in one of Joni Eareckson's devotionals. She writes:

My husband, Ken, serves as a track-and-field coordinator for Special Olympics.

A few years ago at the games, Ken blew his whistle to signal the contestants for the 50-yard dash. A girl with Down syndrome with thick glasses and a short, stocky boy in baggy shorts were the first to line up. There was a moment of stillness, then a "bang" from the starting gun. Off they sprinted - six contestants bobbing and weaving down the track.

Suddenly the boy in baggy shorts began running toward his friends in the infield. Ken blew his whistle to direct him back to the track, but it was no use. At that point, the girl with Down syndrome who was just a few yards from the finish line, turned around, ran toward him, and gave him a big hug. Together they got back on the track and completed the race arm-in-arm, long after the rest of the contestants had crossed the finish line.

We must run the race not to please ourselves, but to please the Lord. That often means taking time to stop and put our arms around a weaker friend who needs to get back on track.

Jesus sees the truly great as those who serve others and humble themselves. That means He sees many of you in this way as you serve humbly behind the scenes not seeking recognition or honor. I pray God continues to strengthen you in that.

For some of us, serving well means we have to set healthy boundaries in our lives. Jesus doesn't call us to burn out. Jesus calls us to come to Him and take His yoke upon us and learn from Him. So if we want to serve from a healthy heart, we need to have boundaries and limitations on our service.

Jesus words invites us to freedom from the constant battle of trying to gain and hold onto power, greatness and recognition. Instead, we can serve others and walking humbly with God. We don't have to live under the heavy burdens. We can walk with Christ and learn His way. Let us come to Him now for help to continue learning about true greatness.