

Ezek. 33:7–9
Rom. 13:1–10
Matt. 18:1–20

“The Greatest in the Kingdom”

Pastor David Nieman

The election is coming up in just two months, and the campaigning continues! You've heard it, you've seen it written on signs and on the internet, things like: “Make America great again!”, or, “Keep America great!”, or, “America was never great!” Don't worry folks, this year, there are plenty of slogans to go around. I guarantee that you'll read something personally upsetting to you in the next few weeks or your money back.

Wherever you're coming at it from, and I'm not here to criticize a particular party, I've been wondering what it means to be great – or what it means to be not great. What is this greatness that we've lost and want to recapture, or that we're trying to preserve, or that we've never really had and need to redefine? How do you define what it takes to be great, and, in the grand scheme of things, is it actually good to be considered great?



Alexander the Great was called “great” because he conquered lots and lots and lots of territory in the ancient world, which meant lots and lots and lots of people died for him to build an empire that fell apart as soon as he died. Is that greatness? It's incredible, perhaps, but I don't know if it's great.

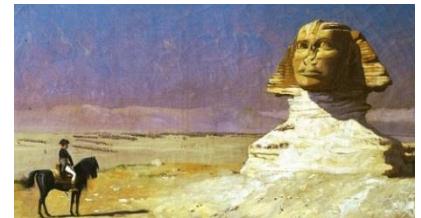
King Herod was known as “the Great” because he built incredible structures during his time as ruler. He left his mark on the Holy Land, but those works are drenched in blood. In addition to his building projects, he also ordered the massacre of the children of Bethlehem in hopes of killing the Messiah. Even for that atrocity, it may have been even more dangerous to be related to him: He also had his many sons, wives, and family members executed to protect his power. Was that greatness?





Pope Leo I was called “the Great” for his many accomplishments in the 400s AD. He helped the church understand that Jesus was True God and True Man, which you probably don’t think about too often, but it’s monumental for how we understand who Jesus is and what he did for us. Pope Leo may also have persuaded Atilla the Hun to turn his hordes away from Rome. Is that great? Was he trying to be great? Did he want us to pay attention to him or the God he worshipped?

Do you think the people who came before us ever hoped to make the British Empire great again – or the Spanish Empire, or the Byzantine Empire, or the Roman Empire, or the Babylonian Empire, or the Kingdom of Israel? Do you think there may have been some who wondered if those kingdoms were ever truly great to begin with? God didn’t even want Israel to have a king – it was another expression of their rejection of their Lord, and even at the height of what we could call the Kingdom’s greatness, its king was an adulterer, a liar, and a murderer. It didn’t take long for it to collapse.



What do we learn from this? At some point, probably a long time from now – but perhaps not – it is likely that the United States won’t be one of the top powers in the world. Empires come and go, and all kingdoms, great or not, fall – except one.



When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, he describes it as a different sort of kingdom – not the sort of kingdom we’d naturally associate with greatness. It’s a place where seeds of the Gospel message are sown all over the place, not just where they’d grow well. It’s a place where the lost sheep are always pursued, and the little ones who we so often overlook are never disregarded. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor in Spirit, and to the persecuted. It’s a place where the last are first and the first are last. Its king rides a donkey and comes to serve in place of being served, and that king has to die to win his greatest victory.

And what does it take to be the greatest in that strange kingdom? Jesus tells us:

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”



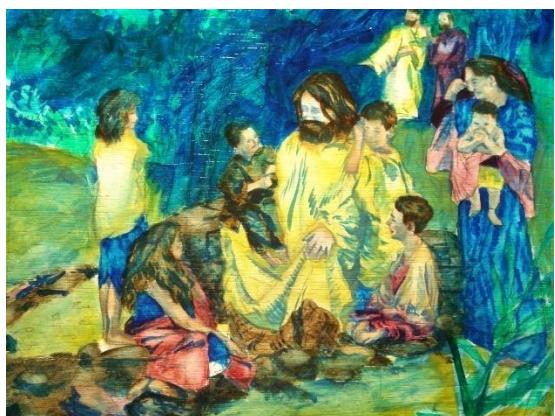
Think of children: what can they give to us? What can they build, or overcome, or conquer? I'm speaking materially, of course, because children have much to give us. But in terms of what they earn, what can be said for them? We say we treasure our children, but how often do we overlook them and their concerns for whatever's bothering us in the moment? If you look at children like the ancients did, then you'd see that in a world where you have to work hard to eat, children had nothing real to offer. For much of their early lives, they couldn't help farm, do repairs, or make important decisions for the household. They were empty mouths and weak hands – of little immediate use to any kingdom or household – *and yet*, Jesus says that we must be just like those children, the ones the disciples were trying to shoo away for wasting Jesus' time, to enter into God's Kingdom.

Put another way: to be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven is to have nothing of our own to offer, and to depend fully on our Great Father as we live and move and have our breath. Like a child (and we are children), you and I can only receive from the hand of God. We have to leave our greatness behind.

And this is important to remember today and every day, because whatever your political party, I think you can agree that politics have a way of taking priority in our lives and conversations. Our party concerns tend to take precedence over God's command to love one another as he has loved us. Don't get me wrong, engaging in politics matters for every Christian – your politics are important, but are they the first thing?

Have you spoken poorly, or written someone off as dumb or actually evil because they don't agree with you? Have you passed hateful, unproven, or downright false messages along because they align with your political beliefs, and that makes it okay? 1 John 4 tells us that anyone who claims to love God and at the same time hates their brother is a liar. It also tells us that we should not **love in word or talk but in deed and in truth**. This shouldn't surprise you, but Christians are people who love truth, both in our confession and in our everyday interactions, especially in what we're sharing with others. For all our talk of being great, you probably haven't been so great this week yourself, have you? Is that what we're truly after when we talk of greatness – to take part in something greater than ourselves so we can look past how disappointing we can so often be? Take comfort: 1 John 3 also tells us that,

"By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us."



Your God is greater than your brokenness and sin, your God is greater than your accusing heart. He is greater than the lies and half-truths and competing narratives that are flying around you. He has forgiveness and life for all who depend on him. And as he has loved you, he is also telling you to love the people he's put around you. In these days, you may ask, "What is truth?" Pontius Pilate did, too, when he was looking the Way, the Truth, and the Life straight in the eyes. Our Lord is great, but he is easy to overlook when the multitude is grumbling. Don't make Pilate's mistake; trust in Jesus as he stands before you. Call him, "Lord."

As our nation thunders and rages against itself, I pray that this nation would thrive as an expression of God's left hand Kingdom, as a place where justice is carried out its people can enjoy security and opportunity. I pray that we Christians would seek to participate in and lift up our government to do its best. I also pray that our churches would thrive as expressions of God's right hand kingdom, that God's truth would always be proclaimed in its fullness and that forgiveness would abound with a sense of urgency and love. I pray that our leaders lead well, with a heart for the people. I pray that in our states, counties, cities, our churches, and in our households of faith, we seek always to depend more fully on our God.

Our God is truly great – he is the true authority and the power above all powers. May our God bless you, little ones, as we wait for the King to return – not to make things great again, but to hear again those ancient words that were spoken on the sixth day, when our Father first stepped back from his work and looked at all that he had made, and said that it was *very good*. Amen.