

Called TO Greatness

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Lesson 1: An Upside Down Kingdom

God is calling you to greatness.

That is right: God expects you to be great. Not average but great. In John 14:12, Jesus specifically said that those who follow Him would do even greater things than He had been doing. With that promise, He has also given us the necessary skills and abilities we need in order to pull off this task. The problem is that the lives we are living as Christians could probably be best described as average. And because we are settling for less than what God has called us to, the world around us is suffering. Here are some statistics to explain what I am talking about. As I write this:

The average person will spend over 9 years of their life watching television [talk about settling for mediocrity].

Based on the average hours per week, a teenager will spend over a month on social networking every single year.

Only 26% of teens read their Bibles regularly.

Less than 50% of Christians will ever share their faith with someone.

The results:

If the trends continue the way they are currently, only 4% of this generation will follow Christ.

To sum up: We are failing miserably. We are settling for a lie the world has told us about what life is about, what we can accomplish, and what our purpose should be. There is no way to tell whether we just do not know what life is supposed to be about, or if we do know and are just choosing to do our own thing anyway. Either way, we can see that the way we are living life is not working.

ASK: WHAT IS YOUR GOAL IN LIFE?

Depending on the age of your group they may not have an answer to this question. If they were honest, much of this generation would say "to be famous". Every time we turn around someone has his or her own reality show or YouTube video. We live in a culture of famous people and we want people to notice us as much as possible. Christians are not immune to this. Celebrity

Christians have become another new phenomenon where we sit around and look for the next big person in Christianity that we can lift up on a pedestal.

This is why in learning about the fact that God is calling us to greatness and how to attain that greatness, we start with this principle:

WE MUST REDEFINE GREATNESS.

God's desire for us to be great is not the same as the world's model for greatness. In fact, not the same is an understatement. God's picture of greatness is completely upside down from what the world looks at as greatness. And if we are ever going to be great in the sense that God desires us to be great with the lives He has given us, we must understand this concept.

To understand this, we are going to dig into the Bible. This is where we look to get a clear picture of what God desires of us, and what He wants our lives to look like. In the passages we are going to study, we will see that we are not the first people to struggle with this idea of being great. We will also see just exactly how Jesus not only taught what greatness in God's Kingdom is, but He also modeled it for us.

Read Luke 9:28-48

So let's try and grasp as best we can what is going on here. Earlier in this chapter the disciples have been sent out to do ministry and have healed people, cast out demons and seen Jesus feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Now Jesus has taken a few of His disciples up on a mountain (according to commentaries this could be a literal or a figurative mountain), His face and clothes are literally glowing with the glory of God, and to top it all off Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in the Old Testament, decide to show up and hang out. Not to mention a cloud drops on the disciples and they hear the voice of God. Then the next day Jesus lays the smack down on some demons. This seems like a pretty crazy couple of weeks to me.

If you were in this situation walking with Jesus, how do you think you would have reacted?

What sort of conversations do you think you would have?

But in v. 48, what conversation are the disciples having?

That's right, they are talking about who among them will be the greatest. We could judge the disciples and wonder how they could possibly think about themselves at a time like this. And honestly, I am in a little shocked every time I

read this passage. But if we really think about it, are we any different? When we come to know Christ and trust Him for our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins, and then go live however we want to, are we any better than the disciples? Plus, we are not much different than the disciples in the sense that when we see greatness we want to model it. We see a high score and we want to beat it. We go to a concert and we want to practice more to get better. We see someone do something dumb on YouTube and we want to do something even dumber. We all want to do something to bring attention to ourselves because that is what greatness is in our world: fame, fortune, attention, and popularity. In essence, being on top is being great.

Now this is not the only instance where the disciples have this type of conversation. It happens several times in all four Gospels. This points to our human struggle with pride and power. But each time this conversation comes up, Jesus basically brings the same response. He never says greatness is a bad thing; He just shows the disciples that they have misunderstood the idea. Read v. 48.

In this verse Jesus basically flipped everything upside down.

TO BE GREAT IN GOD'S KINGDOM, YOU MUST BE LEAST.

How much sense does that make? We are supposed to finish at the bottom of the pile? When was the last time you were told you were great for finishing last at an event or getting an F? It has probably been a while if it has ever happened. While Jesus is not telling us to be a failure, He is completely redefining what we are supposed to view as greatness. Jesus is telling us that to be great in His Kingdom we must be least.

This is completely reversed from everything we are usually taught and everything that is usually modeled for us. When you think of those who are the least in our society, whom do you usually think of? I think of the poor and those in service jobs like cleaning or waiting tables. Now hear me, I am not saying they are lowly people compared to the rest of us. I am talking about how they are usually viewed and treated compared to the rest of us. I want to try and get you thinking about that picture of the least in our day because that is what Jesus did for His disciples. Children in the time of Christ were near the bottom of society and often were not treated well. If nothing else, they were definitely not viewed with much esteem and did not have any power. This is much like the least in our day. But Jesus told His disciples to receive those lowly children. Then He tells His disciples that the least among them will be the greatest.

I believe Jesus is highlighting a few things in this passage.

1. WE ARE CALLED TO SOMETHING GREATER THAN OURSELVES: THE MISSION OF GOD IN THIS WORLD.

The disciples were trying to make things about themselves as they did at other points in scripture and Jesus quickly redirects them. The great thing here as we look at what Jesus did for His disciples and for us is that He did not just take away something from the disciples. He took something away for their own good to give them the chance to be a part of something greater than they could have ever imagined. If He had allowed them to focus on themselves, their lives might have led to a little fame, fortune and comfort. But instead they got to give up everything to honor God and be a part of changing the world in His name. It was not easy. It took sacrifice and the disciples had to be knocked down a few notches, but the sacrifices did not compare to the great rewards they received.

We are kind of the same way. Much of what we do is about us. We watch TV because we think life is about our comfort. We do things in relationships with a guy or girl because we think life is about our pleasure. We post stuff on Facebook or YouTube because we have decided life is about people paying attention to us. We devote our time to all sorts of things to get power and "success" for ourselves. We waste much of our time because we do not see the great purpose God wants to give us in life. And the same call Jesus gave His disciples He is giving to us: Give it all up. If you truly want to be great in God's kingdom, you must be the least. I hope you will see that today. I also hope you will see that the things you are pursuing may give you a little temporary pleasure, but that pleasure is fleeting and does not compare to what God has in store for you. Allow God to begin to move in your heart and cause you to wrestle with just exactly what needs to change. What do you need to give up? Because when you are faced with the reality of what Christ is calling to you to, change must happen. You can't stay the same. Either you choose to follow or you choose to harden your heart and continue down the same path you are on.

2. GOD WANTS US TO LOVE THE LEAST IN THIS WORLD.

Like I said, children in Jesus' day were the lowest of the low and Jesus told His disciples that to be received by Him they must receive the least. It is about getting off our high horses and instead getting our hands dirty with those the world looks down on or has forgotten. This message is repeated over and over in scripture. I won't devote too much time here because we will discuss this in detail in lesson 3. But there is another thing I want to highlight here. I believe that Jesus is pointing again to what He values. Or maybe more importantly, to whom He values. We have already seen that God's Kingdom is upside down. But let's look at another passage that really points to just how upside down God's kingdom really is.

Read Luke 6:20-26

This whole passage is beautiful. I encourage you and your students to read through it and allow it to speak to you some time. But for now I encourage you take a moment to walk piece by piece through this section of the passage. Ask your students: What jumps out to you? How does this compare to how the world thinks? To how you think? What would people think if you lived like this? How do you think the world would be different if we lived with this attitude?

God loves and values things that we do not naturally love and value. So we have to allow God to begin to work on us and change us so that we can begin to see the world as He sees it. Romans 12:2 talks about not being conformed to the patterns of this world but being transformed by the renewing of your mind. If we are going to be great in God's kingdom, we must begin to be transformed and see things differently.

3. TO BE THE GREATEST IN GOD'S KINGDOM YOU MUST BE A SERVANT.

Thinking back to whom we described as the least in our world, I see things that they have in common. One is that the people we listed usually have to depend on others. The poor often have to depend on others for help. Waiters have to depend on others for tips. This is not much unlike the fact that we must depend on God if we are going to be great in His kingdom. But another thing that I see that the least in our world have in common is that they are servants. If we are going to be great in God's eyes, we have to stop making life about us and start to make it about serving Him and serving others. Jesus taught this sentiment many times in many ways. One of my favorites is when Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment? Jesus replies that the first is greatest. This is the one where we are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Then He says the second is like it where we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The really cool thing is that Jesus basically said that everything ever taught and everything we are supposed to do can be summed up in those two commandments. Simply put, our entire lives are supposed to be about loving and serving God and loving and serving people. And when we allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives and lead us and transform us, we begin to desire to be a servant and see how we can serve. Then as we live those things out we begin to attain the kind of greatness God is calling us to.

This is not the kind of advice you will find at motivational seminars on how to be successful, but we are not supposed to do things the world's way. This will not be easy. You may get mocked or even beaten up a little bit. But this is the ultimate joy in all of this. James tells us that we should consider it all joy when we face trials and struggles because it is part of God perfecting us. The other great thing is that we get to follow

the most amazing leader ever known to the world. Many leaders would call you to serve and do great things, but none have modeled it the way Christ has.

Let's read and think about this idea.

Read Philippians 2:1-18

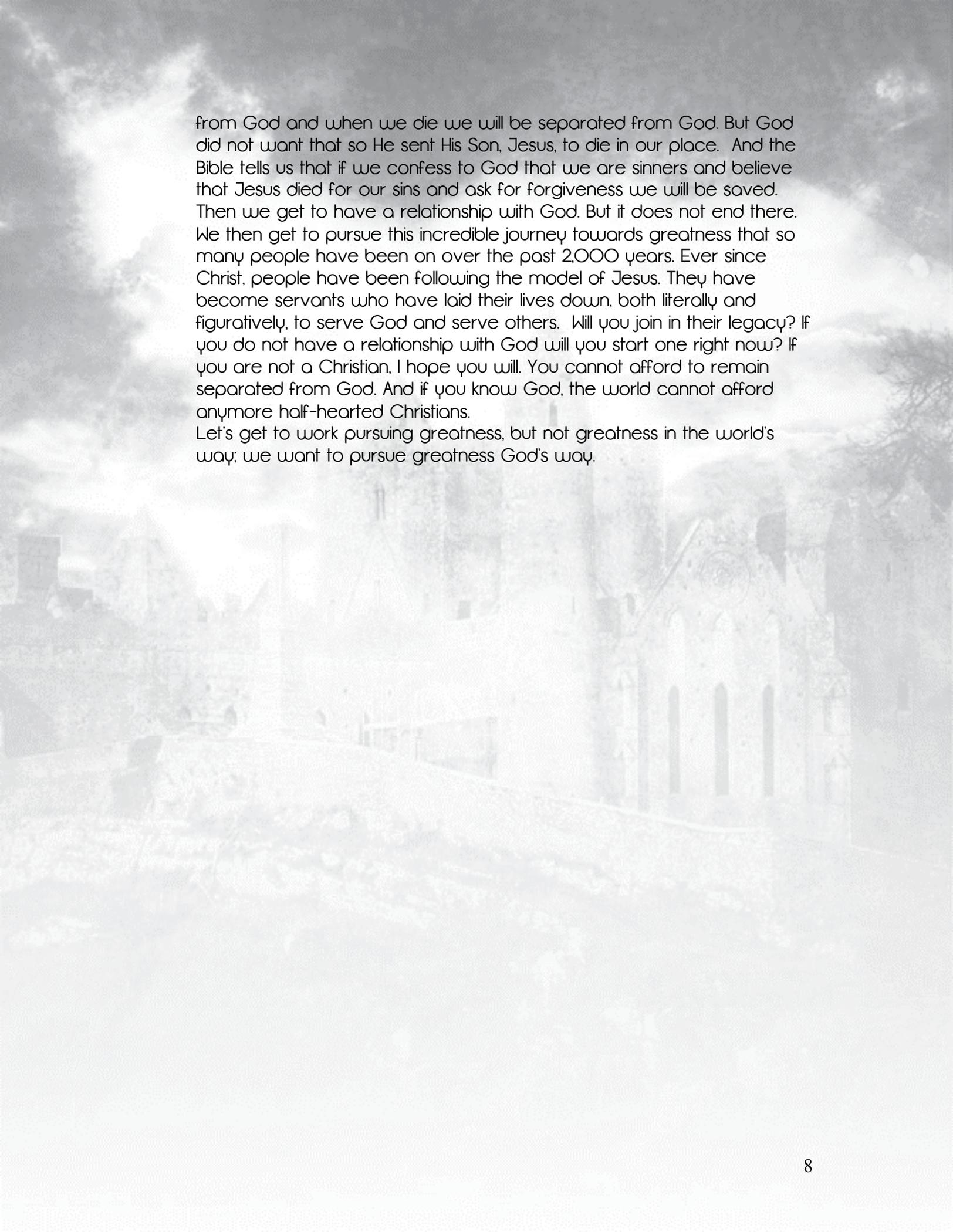
There are some reminders to us here but let's not make this about us. Jesus, who is God, came to Earth as John 1 tells us. He had legions of angels worshipping Him and an existence none of us could have imagined. He decided to come to Earth, but not as a king, even though he could have. And frankly, that is what many of God's people were expecting and hoping for as they looked for a Messiah. But instead, He came to Earth as a servant. He was born to an unwed teenage mom in a cave. He grew up in poverty in a town that no one thought anything good could come from. He plied a trade His entire life. He called others that weren't good enough to follow Him to be His messengers on earth. Even though Jesus lived a sinless life and spent His life teaching, loving, and serving others, He was arrested. He was beaten worse than anything we could ever imagine. He was falsely accused, mocked, and spit on. All this was done by many of the same people who had praised Him five days earlier. His closest friends on Earth betrayed Him in His moment of need. He died the most painful and shameful death ever known to man. But in the midst of all of this, He forgave those who were crucifying Him. He even ministered to someone else, a thief, in the midst of His pain and suffering. He died and was so poor they could not afford a tomb. But a rich man came a long and offered to bury Him. It would be sad if the story ended there. But it did not. On the third day Jesus rose from the dead. He overcame death and our sin. He fulfilled His purpose on this Earth and attained the greatness that God had laid before Him to attain. I love the way Paul sums this up in Romans.

Read Romans 3:23-25

We all have sin in our lives that messes things up. It also separates us from God. We deserve to die for that sin but Jesus gave up everything to come to earth and die in our place. He took on our sin so that we could be forgiven, have a relationship with God, and be a part of the beautiful story He is writing every day.

Think about it. Jesus took on the wrath that God could have brought against us for our sin. And instead we have the opportunity to receive grace and forgiveness that we cannot fully comprehend.

Have you ever done that? Have you admitted that you have a sin problem? We all do. Because of that sin problem, we are separated



from God and when we die we will be separated from God. But God did not want that so He sent His Son, Jesus, to die in our place. And the Bible tells us that if we confess to God that we are sinners and believe that Jesus died for our sins and ask for forgiveness we will be saved. Then we get to have a relationship with God. But it does not end there. We then get to pursue this incredible journey towards greatness that so many people have been on over the past 2,000 years. Ever since Christ, people have been following the model of Jesus. They have become servants who have laid their lives down, both literally and figuratively, to serve God and serve others. Will you join in their legacy? If you do not have a relationship with God will you start one right now? If you are not a Christian, I hope you will. You cannot afford to remain separated from God. And if you know God, the world cannot afford anymore half-hearted Christians. Let's get to work pursuing greatness, but not greatness in the world's way; we want to pursue greatness God's way.

Lesson 1 Discussion Questions

- 1. When you hear the word "greatness" what comes to mind?**
- 2. If I were to ask the people around you what they thought you were making your life about, what would they say?**
- 3. If you were going to describe what Jesus wants our lives to be about, what would you say?**
- 4. What do you think it would look like for you to be the least at your school?**
- 5. What is the hardest thing about this idea?**
- 6. What jumped out at you in Luke 6?**
- 7. What are the things in your life that are holding you back from attaining greatness God's way?**
- 8. Will you lay those down? Why or why not?**
- 9. Take some time to talk about the Gospel with your group and give them an opportunity to receive it.**