

*Every Christian has been guilty of misunderstanding greatness in God’s kingdom, therefore we all need Jesus to teach us what godly greatness and its reward look like, and to hear his warning that hell is the reward for pursuing sinful greatness.*

**Introduction & Background** – The Son of Man is great, but often disciples misunderstand greatness. Not much time has passed since Jesus taught his followers the first principle of Christian discipleship (self-denial, cross-bearing, and Jesus-following; cf. Lk 9:23), but much has happened since their first discipleship lesson. So what are they talking about now?

## **I. Who is the Greatest? (Disciples vs. Jesus)**

### **A. Disciples: I am the greatest, because... (vv. 30-34)**

1. It is ironic that the disciples may have thought Jesus was preoccupied with his death, when the disciples were preoccupied with their own greatness in the kingdom. If Jesus died, then the kingdom they envisioned could not come.
2. The most recent historical liberation of the Jews during the Maccabean revolt (166-160 BC) possibly served as their reference point. “Who gets to be king after Jesus?” Unfortunately, the disciples still had not learned the first principle of discipleship.

### **B. Jesus: The greatest is the last of all and servant of all (vv. 35-37)**

If anyone wants to be great then he must make himself servant of all (cf. Lk 22:24-27)! Does anyone actually live this way? Yes, God meets his own paradoxical standard of greatness. Jesus was servant of all and made himself last (Jn 13:13-17). Here he taught his disciples by example, bringing a small child into the discussion, loving and embracing him. By doing so Jesus gently chastised his disciples.

### **C. Jesus: The greatest rejoices when “outsiders” glorify Jesus (vv. 38-41)**

Jesus points out the obvious: the man doing mighty works in Jesus’ name is a friend, not a foe. Therefore he should be encouraged. Paul makes this same point (Rom 14:4). While following Jesus, we should focus on our assignment, and not be quick to criticize other believers on the “outside”.

## **II. What Will Destroy Godly Greatness?**

### **A. Causing “little ones” to sin (v. 42)**

Who are the “little ones”? Primarily: children (v. 36). Secondly: seemingly insignificant believers who lack status (v. 39). The term “little ones” is one of endearment for children of God—young or old (1 Jn 2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 5:21). Receiving a little one is contrasted with causing him to sin. Jesus warns that whoever causes a lowly person to sin is in danger of God’s severe judgment.

### **B. Committing sin in what you do, where you go, and what you look at (vv. 43-48)**

1. A Hard Saying: this is the art of spiritual self-mutilation. If you want to be great in the kingdom of God, then you will have to deal drastically with your sin. Remember, hyperbole is *figurative* language that conveys *literal* truth; it is not an exaggeration you are free to dismiss. Cutting off a body part will not root out the sin in the heart (cf. Mt 15:19). Nevertheless, Jesus means we must make drastic life choices to eradicate sin in our lives.

2. Sins of the hand (what you do). Examples of sins committed by the hand include murder, adultery, and theft, but also include any sin of omission or commission.
3. Sins of the foot (where you go). Examples include going somewhere to commit sin and setting your life path toward disobedience (Prov 4:14-19).
4. Sins of the eye (what you look at or think about). These include coveting, lust, and by derivation all other sins, since the eye is the lamp of the body (Mt 6:22-23).

### III. What are the “Rewards” for Greatness?

#### A. Rewards for godly greatness (vv. 37, 41, 49-50)

1. Fellowship with God (v. 37). Jesus equates receiving the small child for the sake of serving Christ as receiving God. If disciples humbly care for those of lowly status, in the name of Christ, then their reward will be personal fellowship with the Son and the Father. Amazing!
2. Secure blessings from God (v. 41). God notices even small deeds of kindness believers do for fellow believers, and God himself rewards these deeds of mercy. This truth should absolutely transform our idea of how we serve God. To serve those in need by meeting their needs, done for love of Christ, is counted as sacrifice offered to God, and which God has promised to reward.
3. Your life accepted as a sacrifice to God (v. 49). Jesus is probably saying that the salt and fire which come into a believer’s life are evidence of sacrifice (Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24). Something painful will come into every believer’s life. But a sacrifice of salt and fire is pleasing to God and will have a purifying and preserving effect on the believer (Col 4:6; 1 Pet 4:12-13).
4. Worldly usefulness to God (v. 50). If disciples won’t cut off their sin, then they will become useless (Mt 5:13; cf. Mt 12:32; Heb 6:4-6; Rev 3:15-17). Jesus is asking his disciples to be “salty”—to stand out in the world to both preserve it and bring the “flavor of the kingdom of God” to a fallen world (Job 42:5, 8; Mt 5:13). There is no better way to be at peace with others than to love and serve them.

#### B. Rewards for sinful greatness (vv. 43, 45, 47-48)

Eternal torment and destruction in hell (vv. 43, 45, 47-48). Jesus’ description of hell is a powerful warning for sinners to repent and escape eternal judgment. The whole Bible teaches, and Jesus frequently confirms, that hell is real and is a place where the wicked will be tormented forever. Those in hell experience everlasting shame (Dan 12:2). Their prison shackles remain locked and secured tight forever (Jude 6-7). Their souls will never have rest, day or night (Rev 14:9-11; 20:10), and will be destroyed everlastingly (2 Thess 1:9).

**Conclusion** – Even if up to this point you’ve tolerated sin and haven’t made many painful breaks with the sin you value, Jesus went all the way—for you. He had no sin, but he became sin for you. He is that which is ultimately valuable, but he was cut off from his family, friends, people, and his Heavenly Father and cast away like he was some ugly sin. He knows the pain of sacrifice because his whole life was a sacrifice pleasing to God. And the Father rewarded him for his sacrifice, for making himself last of all and servant of all, and for this he declared Jesus the greatest! If Jesus is great, then all those in him are great in God’s eyes. So he is calling you to act great, to fulfill your greatness, to make yourself last, to serve all, and to deal drastically with sin. When you learn to look at Jesus, who became sin in your place and was cut off for you, you’ll be moved to never settle for average, but instead to hate your sin, to cut it out of your life because you love Jesus, and to pursue godly servant greatness in faith, hope, and love. Children of God, put your trust in Christ, live in his power to cut off sin, and make yourselves last of all and servant of all. For only then will be you great as you magnify the greatness of Christ.