

Greatness is Serving
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I have two goals in the time we're gonna have for our teaching today. And the first is that when you walk out of here today you will be aware of, you'll recognize, and you will see the excellence that is here. You will see, you will recognize, you'll be aware of the greatness that is here. And there is an excellence, there is a greatness that is here, in this building today. I want you to be able to see it, recognize it, be aware of it. And further, I want you to know how it is it came to be here.

It's gonna take us a bit to do that. Gonna take kind of an unusual approach through a text of scripture today, and it's gonna take me a while to actually get to that passage. But the goal's there and we're gonna set out for it. So let's pray in that direction.

Our Father in heaven,

As we come to this time together and we spend time in Your word, and we go back and we look at the excellence in Your Son, Jesus, I pray and I ask, Father, You would give us the eyes to see, the mind to grasp, and the hearts to cherish His excellence—the excellence not only found as we look into the pages of biblical history, but the excellence that He has brought into being here this day among us.

We pray this in His name. Amen.

Nordstrom's has become almost legendary in the field of marketing for their commitment to, and their excellence in, customer service. Business books that discuss business and how to pursue goals, and everything else, will highlight Nordstrom's among the different marketers and merchandisers in America. They stand out in that area of customer service. And one of the things that intrigues the experts as they study Nordstrom's is how they manage to train their front-line employees to be such great individuals when it comes to service; how is it that they manage to get these people to serve in the way that they do. I mean, there's slogans, but a lot of companies have slogans. There's training manuals; a lot of companies have training manuals. There's rallies with the employees, trying to fire 'em up, and a lot of companies have that. But what is it about Nordstrom's that enables them to excel so greatly in that area?

And what the business experts say, and what they identify, is that—you know what Nordstrom's does? Is they tell stories. And when you join the Nordstrom's staff and you are being trained, throughout your training you will hear stories. You'll hear stories, for example, of the sales clerk that, in serving the customer, realized that the customer had to wear that shirt yet that very afternoon at an important business meeting. And so that sales clerk made sure that she took that shirt, found an iron, found an ironing board, and ironed it for her customer so that, before he went to that meeting, he would have an ironed shirt that he had just bought from her.

Then there's the sales clerk that, when a person came in and was asking for their gifts to be wrapped—in the busy Christmas season—handed her a package, a purchase that she had made at Macy's department store, and said, "Can you gift wrap this for me?" And the Nordstrom's sales person smiled and said "Gladly," and wrapped that package from Macy's.

Then there's the sales person who had a desperate call from one of the customers that was having a very important party that night, and didn't have anything to wear, and couldn't get down to the store. The sales person says, "Don't worry," and picked out just the right—just the right—garments, and made a personal delivery to the home...as quick and as fast as any pizza delivery man.

My favorite? The customer that wanted to return and get a refund on his set of car chains. And the sales clerk says "Gladly," and gave them their refund...even though Nordstrom's never has and never will sell car chains.

That got me thinking about the stories I've accumulated over thirty years pasturing here, thirty years of seeing people serve. I go way back to the early, early days, and I remember our first piano player. And I've told this story before, so it may have a familiar ring to it. But she would play every Sunday. And we had a building at the time...the room we met in...we would come in every Sunday and set up chairs and stuff, and I think the room was no bigger than this stage, that we started in; in fact, it may have been smaller. And she had a little, beat-up piano right here that she would play. As she hit the keys, they would stick and she would quickly have to take her hands under the lip of the keys and pull 'em back up before she could hit the next notes. And she would play the piano like that. This lady's husband was an executive with Alyeska. In that tiny little country church there was nobody that ran in the sort of circles they ran in. And on a Saturday night they may be in Anchorage at a big concert with some other executives, but on Sunday morning she'd be in that little room hitting the keys and pullin' them up, hittin' the keys and pullin' them up.

She wasn't a good piano player. It's gonna be kinda tough. I'd get calls on Saturday night, sometimes, sayin' "Larry, really—do I gotta?" I was a young pastor at the time; I didn't know any better, and I said, "Yeah, you do." So we began to pray right then and there, over the years, that we would have a real piano some day, and piano players. And she would show up Sunday morning and she would play that piano. That's years ago.

A couple weeks ago I go downstairs, and I'm walkin' through the Sunday school department, and I see this young man, and he's wearin' one of our worker vests. And it kinda catches me by surprise. And I greet him, and it just hits me—here's a young man who's just graduated recently from Stanford University, and he's waiting to go to medical school. And he's not waiting to find out if he's accepted by medical schools—he already is. What he's waiting to find out is which medical schools are gonna offer him the biggest scholarships, because they're lining up to get him. And on Sunday morning I walk into our church basement and he's teaching Sunday school to a group of rowdy little boys.

Some people are kinda slow to get it. Had a man that used to come in, and he would be the first one out when church was over, first one out. I was talkin' about it recently with him the other day, and he mentioned another man by name and said, "I used to beat him out." Church was over and this individual was out in the parking lot in his car, warming up, tapping his foot, and waiting for wife and kids to come out. He retired. He still hurried to get out. And one day he heard a sermon; I didn't preach it...it was one of our associates, Paul Schindler. When that sermon was over this individual ran out to the parking lot, sat in his truck...but somethin' got through to him. That individual who was the first one out every Sunday—he became our children's ministry pastor. He devoted the next seven years of his life to building our children's ministry, one volunteer by one volunteer by one volunteer. And he became the last one out every Sunday.

Some people get it really, really quick! I kept hearin' this one man's name, and I'd never met him, and I didn't know who he was. And the staff would be sitting around, and especially when we were plannin' the move to the little junior high school and stuff and we were tryin' to organize everything, I kept hearin' this man's name. And they'd say, "Oh, he's got a trailer—he can help us," "Oh, he's gonna do this...he's gonna do that...and he's got..." And I'm sittin' there and finally "Who is this guy?!?" And they go, "Oh, he's a brand-new Christian. And he just keeps helpin' out." You know when I finally met him? When I came to the 'chair-setting-up'. And this man was here to serve.

Some of 'em are just inspirational; I mean, they keep me movin'. Our snow removal crew this year—it's phenomenal. I mean, we'll get a dump of snow on a Tuesday night and then there'll be a kind of thaw and a freeze-up, and this'll be deep snow and glare ice, and we've got ladies showin' up for bible study. And by the time those ladies show up the parking lot will be clear, the ice will be grooved, and there will be sand on the lot. Had a lady, a widow, one of our widows, an older lady—boy, I'm havin' trouble when I say that kind of stuff. Ok. A lady in our church came in. And she came in and I greeted her, and her first words out of her mouth were "Thank the snow plow crew." It was a busy Sunday morning, and she had driven up, and she's all alone. And she's older, and there's snow all over the place. And she gets out of her car and she's able to walk in, standing firm, without slipping and sliding. And she says "Thank that snow plow crew!" And I was like a coach who's just had his special team return a kick-off for a touchdown. I'm just sittin' there—"Yes!!!"

I drive up every morning this winter. I drive up the parking lot; and one of the things I do as I drive up is I look in the vacant lot down over here and I see two pieces of equipment. And when I see that equipment, that snow plow equipment, I think of the team that has been doin' this all winter long—a team of volunteers. And I tell you what...I walk into this building ready to work longer and harder ever time I see those two vehicles.

One that just sticks with me is a man...he was a head of the electrical co-op for years. He's now moved on and he's out of state, lives somewhere else. I've only seen him like once in the last five years. But I remember in the early years he was here, and he would...he made a point of greeting people. It was one of the things he just felt really strong about is that when people come to church he wanted to greet 'em, and he wanted to remember their name. He wanted next week to be able to greet 'em by name if he could. And so he would be there with his wife, and he would greet people as they came in. And he would listen to their names, he'd get their names, and then later he would get out a piece of paper and he would write those names down. And then, during the week, he would try to review those names, try to remember the faces that went with them. And this was not an assignment we gave him; this was just something he chose to do. And he would try to learn those names, and then next week he would look for that person and he would try to greet 'em by name. And we're talkin' about a man that was goin' through all the hassles that go with bein' a part of a co-op leader, and dealin' with the boards and the crew and the public and everything else, and all the issues coming at him. You would think he had so many other things to deal with, so many other concerns to have. But he was here every Sunday morning, trying to remember people's names so that he could greet 'em and they would feel welcome.

Then he got hit with a strange disease that attacked his nerves in his face. Because the nerve bundle was so intertwined, and everything else, the doctors couldn't do anything with it. And so he had to learn how to live with that pain. It was excruciating pain. He would have to sleep at night in special ways. He would take medication; he took biofeedback; he did everything he could to try to control. He went to special clinics on pain management. And if he spoke it would hurt; and there was times he could barely whisper. He would have to conserve his voice. In fact, there were times he would come in and he would write notes to me so I understood what was goin' on and what was happenin'. And he was very involved as one of our elders, and so in meetings sometimes he would sit and he would write notes to us. But Sunday mornings he would be in our midst and he would greet people, and he would speak their names.

Now, there's stories...there's stories. Nordstrom, move over. But all our stories...all our stories go back to one story. They're all rooted, they're all sourced, in one story. Read it with me, Mark chapter 10. Jesus is at a crucial pointing his ministry. He is moving, and He is going up to Jerusalem. Things are building momentum; they're coming to a head. There's gonna be a reaction, and people know it. He's been to the north and Galilee for most His career. His reputation is build. People are excited about Him. And now He is headed with His disciples to Jerusalem. He's set His face to go there.

And as He goes there He's changed His teaching. From simply speaking to the masses and calling them to the kingdom of God He begins to zero in, He begins to focus on those close ones that are around Him, the disciples, and He begins to work with them. And what He's trying to teach them as He spends time with them is what it really means to follow Him. It's one thing to say He's the Christ; it's one thing to be excited about His miracles; it's one thing to talk about them. But it's a whole 'nother thing He's teaching them—'to follow Me.'

And as we come to this particular passage today we're gonna see that arise again. We're told in verse 32 that

As they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem...

...up to the place where He's going to be crucified...

...Jesus was walking on ahead of them;

You need to picture this. He is setting the pace. Everybody else is simply following Him. And He is setting a pace that...they have to stay with it to keep up with Him. There is a determination about Him and His ministry at this time. And He's walking ahead of them...

...and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful.

It's kind of that mixed feeling—they're in awe of their leader, who's marching to what they know is gonna be a critical moment in Jerusalem; and at the same time they're like soldiers ready to go into battle. They're a little bit afraid; they don't know what's gonna happen. They have great confidence in Jesus, but they also know things are never gonna be the same once they arrive in Jerusalem, and they're not sure what's gonna happen. We're told that...

Again He took the twelve aside...

...he pulled them aside, these twelve that are now amazed but afraid...

...and He began to tell them what was gonna happen to them.

And His next words were not words that would give them courage. If you're afraid, these would only make you, I think, more fearful. He says...

"Behold, we're goin' up to Jerusalem..."

...we're goin' there, guys...

"...and the Son of Man..."

...a reference to Himself, the title He used with respect to Himself...

"...will be delivered to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him, and they will spit upon Him, and they will scourge Him, and they will kill Him, and three days later He will rise again."

This is the third time Jesus has told 'em this. It's the most detailed. He says, 'They'll mock Me, they'll spit on Me, they will scourge Me, and they will kill Me.'

James and John, the two sons of Zebedee,

...two of His disciples, two of His closest disciples, the inner circle, come up to Him and say,

"Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You."

And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

And they said to Him, "Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on the right, and one on Your left."

Catch this—Jesus has just said, 'I'm goin' up to Jerusalem. They're gonna condemn Me; they are gonna turn Me over to the Gentiles, and they're gonna mock Me, they're gonna spit on Me, they're gonna whip Me, and they're gonna kill Me!' 'Jesus, do for us what we ask, what we really want you to do. Let us sit in the places of privilege.' That's the third time Jesus told them this, and it's the third time they don't pick up on what's happening. They're so caught up in what's about to go on for them, and their hopes of glory, that they don't hear what their leader is gonna be goin' through. It doesn't register. They think He's just talking in parables again.

And Jesus says to them,

"You do not know what you are asking for." He says, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

'Are you ready? Are you able to go what I'm goin' through?' They come back, 'We're able! We're ready! Bring it on!' And He says to them,

"The cup that I drink you shall drink; you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am being baptized."

'You're gonna suffer,' is what He's saying.

"But to sit on My right hand or My left hand, that's not Mine to give..."

'I'd like to give it to whoever I want; I can't. It's not Mine to give.'

"...but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

And the other disciples think, 'Huh! Come on!' And they take offense at James and John trying to find...get dibs...grab the places of privilege and position and power. And Jesus calls them to Himself. And we're gonna slow down, we're just gonna read this. He calls them to Himself, and He says to them...He pulls His twelve aside...He says 'Listen...' He says,

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles, they lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them."

'You know that in the world, the great people, the powerful people, have the position and the power, and that's how they work, what they do—through orders and commands, and their authority and power.' He says, 'That's the way it is in the world. But,' He says, 'that's not the way it's gonna be among you. Among My followers,' He says, 'it's gonna be very, very different. Among My followers,' He says,

"...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant."

And He goes on. He says

"Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be the slave of all."

In other words, He says, 'Among My people, you wanna see greatness, look at the person who's serving. Don't look for the person who's giving directions. Look for the person that's taking direction. Don't look for the person that's lining out the orders. Look for the person that's accepting those orders. Don't look for the person that's come in and said "What are you gonna do for me?" Look for the person that comes in, says "What can I do for you?"' Jesus says, 'When you see that, you're seeing greatness.'

You need to understand...for Jesus, this is not some little proverbial saying. This is not some little motto to get His people serving customers better. This is not some marketing gimmick. He goes on. He says,

"For even the Son of Man..."

...a reference to Himself. He picks a particular messianic title from the Old Testament that is enthused, and infused, and covered with the sense of glory and majesty. It's one of the most magnificent pictures of the Messiah in the Old Testament, is when

"...one who is like the Son of Man..."

...appears in the Old Testament prophecies. He's majestic; He's powerful; and all the world is given to Him to be ruled. And Jesus says "*For even the Son of Man...*", a reference to Himself, the majestic Messiah, the King who will set all things right...

"...even the Son of Man," He says, *"did not come to be served, but to serve..."*

I tell you what...you read through the gospel story and you will see that. People didn't feed Him; He fed them. People didn't help Him; He helped them. He came among us as a servant. And not only that—it goes on and says

"...and to give His life a ransom for many."

He says, 'I came; the Messiah came to give His life, to lay it down; to be spit upon, to be mocked, to be tortured, and to die, as a ransom.' In other words, a payment for all the wrong that you and I have ever done. He says, 'That's what I came to do. I didn't come so that you would suddenly treat me right. I came so that I could do the right thing for you, who've done so much wrong.'

And that's the way the story unfolds. He goes on to Jerusalem. And when He goes on to Jerusalem He is condemned. He is given over to the Gentiles. And He is mocked, He is spit upon, He is tortured, and He is killed. And His life is given as a ransom. And in that giving of His life, He opened the gates of grace for all who believe. His one act of obedience, we're told, made up for all the wrongs you and I have ever done or could ever do. That's greatness. And every story of service and sacrifice and greatness among us is rooted in that story.

But that story, and our stories, is not enough to turn any one of us here in this room into a servant. Nordstrom's is on to a training technique—tell the stories, people will learn, and they will serve. That won't work in the church. It's too costly to serve here. Stories won't turn you into a servant.

What will? Let's read a little further. I'm gonna take us about five minutes over to do this. It says they came to Jericho.

And as He was going out from Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude was there, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road. And when he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and began to say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

We're talking about a man screaming it out; so loud, and so distracting, we're told in verse 48,

And many were sternly telling him to be quiet.

I mean, Jesus is on a mission. The crowds are swelling, and the pilgrimage and the march of people to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover... And they're tellin' this blind man 'Be quiet! You're not part of this!'

And he keeps cryin' out all the more,

"Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And we're told that Jesus stopped. And you need to picture this. We're told the crowd is movin' forward. There's people followin' Him, and there's crowds movin' to Jerusalem. And suddenly, we're told, this man is screaming out. And we're told that Jesus suddenly *stands still*. And He simply says, 'Call that man here.'

And they call out to the blind man, and they say to him

"Take courage, arise! He is calling for you."

And casting aside his cloak, he jumped up, and he came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

"*What do you want Me to do for you?*" It's the word of a servant. It's the same thing He said when the disciples came to Him and said, 'We want You to do something for us, anything; give us a blank check here.' And He looked at 'em and His response was not 'You foolish men.' His response was "*What do you want Me to do for you?*" It's a servant's response. And here again, here's this blind beggar who's interrupted the march to Jerusalem. And He stops still, and He brings the man up, and He says, "*What do you want Me to do for you?*"

And the man says, 'I want to regain my sight! I had it once, but I've lost it and I want it back!' And Jesus says to him,

"Go your way; your faith has made you well."

He had had to tell the disciples, 'Listen, what you want is not mine to give.' And sometimes a servant has to say that. But this time He can give what the man needs. And He responds, and there is healing. And here comes the important line. The man regained his sight,

...and began following Him on the road.

...the road of service; the road of sacrifice.

There's a reason I picked the particular individuals I described earlier; because I know the story of every and each one of them. And in each one of those individuals there was a time when they called out to Jesus and said, "Have mercy on me," and Jesus answered. And when He served them, they began to follow Him and became servants. Among us, we become servants because The Servant, the Servant of servants, has served us when we needed it most.

You're gonna walk out of here today, and some of you are gonna go downstairs. And as you go downstairs you're gonna get your kids out of Sunday school. And there's gonna be somebody there wearing a brown vest. They've just been with your child for an hour and fifteen minutes. That's what we schedule Sunday school for. When you receive your child from that nursery...they come rushing at you out of that first grade class...when you see that person wear that brown vest I want you to recognize, I want you to be aware of, and I want you to know—you are in the presence of greatness. In just a few minutes you're going to stand up and have a word of prayer. And as you leave you'll make your way through a row of chairs. And as you walk through that row of chairs and you touch it with your hand, I want you to recognize that there's a greatness there...some quiet individuals here, early, early, setting them up. And when you walk out into that parking lot today and walk across that maintained gravel, and you're not slippin' and slidin' through slush (partly helped by the weather), I want you to recognize there's a greatness there. And I want you to recognize in each case, and in every time, that that greatness is there because the Servant of servants, Jesus, has been among us—and we're becoming servants.

Let's stand.

Our Father in heaven,

As we close this day I pray and I ask that the words of Your Son that bring such clarity, such perspective, would give us perspective and clarity. And Father, even more at the same time I pray that the reality of Him as the servant, answering our cries for mercy... Father, I pray and I ask that You would renew us through this Easter season in that reality.

In His glorious name, the name Jesus, we pray. Amen.