

God has placed elders in the church to have oversight and to shepherd the flock (Acts 20:28). Their qualifications are especially character qualities (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:6–9). But since elders are to lead by example (1 Peter 5:1–4; cf. 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7), these character qualities are the pattern for all believers to follow.

Jesus prescribed a standard of greatness much different than the world's. It is a standard for those who would be "first" or who aspire to "greatness," and therefore especially for elders in the church. The qualities which define true greatness are among those to be modeled for every believer. Therefore, the qualities to be found in church leaders (including true "greatness") can be taken as exhortations and qualities to which every believer should aspire.

What then makes someone great? Jesus called John the Baptist the greatest that had lived until then and He told His disciples how they could become great. Answer the questions of what made John great (yet least) and what would make the disciples great, and you will have discovered what makes true greatness for which we should all eagerly desire.

I. *What made John the Baptist great?* (Matthew 11:7–11; cf. Luke 7:18–35)

1. *The people's estimation of John (Matt 11:7–9a):* John was the outspoken epitome of an Old Testament prophet. The common people accepted his message, whereas the Jewish leaders did not believe.
2. *Jesus's estimation of John (Matt 11:9b–11):* John was a prophet and more, greater than all previous men, but less than the least in the kingdom of heaven.
3. *John's estimation of himself (John 1:23, 27; 3:28–30):* John was the forerunner of the Messiah, unworthy of the Messiah, and gladly destined to be eclipsed by the Messiah.

So why was John great?

He was great because of his privilege as the forerunner and his faithful performance of that task. He saw Jesus, knew Jesus, proclaimed Jesus, and then got out of His way.

II. *What would make the disciples great?* (Mark 10:32–45; cf. Matthew 20:17–28)

In response to the indignant reaction of the disciples to the presumptuous request of James and John for the honor of sitting at the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom, Jesus describes what true greatness is.

1. *Jesus's description of the world's view of greatness (Mark 10:42):* Pagan leaders subdued, tyrannized, and gave the show of helping while benefitting themselves.
2. *Jesus's prescription for true greatness (Mark 10:43–44):* The disciple who wishes to become a "mega" person will serve others and relinquish their rights to others.
3. *Jesus's model of true greatness (Mark 10:45):* Jesus, who deserved to be served, set the standard for greatness by coming, not to be served, but to serve ultimately in giving his life as a ransom for many.

True greatness begins with entering the kingdom of heaven, which God accomplished in Christ for believers (Colossians 1:13–14). Then God begins to shape true believers into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Cooperating with this work of God, by striving to become Christ-like, is being on the path to greatness. One day everyone will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Beginning now and pointing others to Jesus joins in God's great work. Making Jesus Christ central in our lives is true greatness.

A church needs to value true greatness for each member and for its leadership. Misjudging true greatness can have tragic results. Making Christ central in life and ministry has eternal reward.

For further thought and discussion:

Suggested readings: Matt 11:7–19 (Luke 7:18–35) ; Mark 10:32–45 (Matt 20:17–28; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 22:24–27)

- What are potential indicators that "greatness" is not understood biblically? ...in our daily lives? ...in the church?
- What might show that true biblical "greatness" is understood and practiced? ...in an elder/pastor? ...in the "sheep"?
- How can we encourage one another to strive for true greatness?