

“Performing Against Christ’s Metrics” The Reverend Christine Chakoian  
Philippians 2:5-15 First Presbyterian Church  
Mark 10:35-45 Lake Forest, Illinois  
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What counts for greatness? It depends on your perspective. In the business world, greatness is measured by a complex set of metrics that starts with earnings and performance against expectation. In certain social circles, greatness might be measured by the square footage of one’s houses and the numbers of celebrities one counts as friends. In the universe of academics, greatness is gauged by books published, conferences keynoted, and the endowed chair in which one sits. In sports there are a million measures; this time of year is a flurry of statistics, from baseball play-offs to marathon times to college football ranking. In the world of beauty, still another set of metrics counts, as model Filippa Hamilton recently discovered. Apparently being 5’10” and 120 lbs. is considered overweight; Ralph Lauren photo-shopped her picture so that her waist was smaller than her head.

In every arena, there are measures of greatness. What are they in your world?

Now as Christians ... as Christians, worrying over greatness is not considered a virtue. We’re not supposed to care about our own relative importance. Like the apostles James and John, we must always work at conquering our own egos. We’re not supposed to concern ourselves with competition, or rank ourselves against other people. We should be humble, we tell ourselves. We should bury our aspirations as a thing of the past.

Right? Well not so fast.

I’ve become convinced that in general, the way God hard-wires human beings is the way we’re supposed to be. Oh, things can go hay-wire, no doubt, but if a basic reality of human existence is the drive for greatness, the capacity for aspiration, then my guess is that we’re made that way for a reason.

If that's true, then it would surprise me if Jesus told us never to aspire to greatness. Let's look again at *exactly* what Jesus says to his disciples in this morning's lesson. Does he say "don't strive for greatness"? Does he say "don't aspire to be first"? No, he does not. Instead, Jesus tells us this: whoever wishes to become great must become a servant for others; whoever wishes to be first must become a slave for others. In his world, greatness is measured by its own distinctive metrics. That is a very different message than telling us to shut down our hard-wiring, and check our aspirations at the baptismal door.

If I'm reading it right, then the drive toward greatness should receive positive treatment elsewhere in the New Testament – AND Christ's definition of greatness should be affirmed. Lo and behold, they are. St. Paul talks about his own faith this way: "I count as rubbish everything that I used to aspire towards, and I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God" (Philippians 3:8,12). Elsewhere, Timothy is urged not to strive for riches, which can "plunge people into ruin"; instead he is encouraged to vigorously "fight the good fight of faith" (I Timothy 6:9, 12). And in the letter to the Hebrews, all of us are urged to "lay aside every weight and run with perseverance the race that is set before us. ..." (Hebrews 12:1, 12, 14).

Christianity is not devoid of aspirations. The key is to use the right metrics, and strive for the right goal. Jesus himself sets the pattern so that we are able to see with bracing clarity what he's calling us to do. In this morning's lesson from Mark we read, "The Son of Man gave up his life as a ransom for many." In Philippians it says, "Jesus did not regard as equality with God a thing to be exploited for himself, but emptied his ego, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death." This is Jesus' goal: to serve God so completely that he would be willing to give up life itself for the sake of God's people. That is the standard by which he measured himself; that is the greatness he achieved.

Most of us, of course, are not called to be martyred for the gospel, to lay down our lives in the literal sense. But we are all challenged by Christ to love

the Lord our God more than life itself, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to fulfill God's deepest yearning, that we love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the kind of greatness to which we aspire: greatness not of ego but of selflessness; greatness not of wealth but of generosity; greatness not of pride but of humility. A greatness that transforms every arena of the world God loves.

What does Christian greatness look like in the business world? It starts with simple choices like telling the truth, being fair, having integrity. Even more, it means measuring success by more than your paycheck and bonus ... it means measuring success by the impact of your work on society.

During the Great Depression a member of our own church, R. Douglas Stuart headed Quaker Oats. It was a time when many people were struggling literally for survival. In 1933 he wrote to his son, Bob Stuart, about his responsibility as a business leader: "All of us who have a job to do must do it thoroughly, conscientiously, and carefully ... Every one of us who has advantages must not take them selfishly, but with a realization that each and every one of us has a responsibility to our fellow citizens" (p. 24). Later he wrote, "We need greater spirituality in our lives ... we have got to develop a greater unselfishness. The basis of our whole trouble has been individual selfishness. We must be more thoughtful of others, both in our attitude of mind and in our actions"(p. 30). A few decades later, church member and Kellogg school professor Bob Neuschel echoed this same sense. In the age of Michael Milkin and other ruthless Wall Street titans, Bob Neuschel popularized the idea of the "servant leader." "The leader," he said, "needs unswerving strength of character. The choices will be difficult, the temptations many. ... The noble leader will not ... take personal advantage of power but will rather direct it to the enhancement of his [cause] and the growth of his people" (p. 6, p. 131).

They sound an awful lot like our first lesson from today: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard his position a thing to be exploited for himself." These business leaders got it about real

greatness, using our gifts, our blessings, our station – used not for our own ambition, but in service to God for the up-building of others.

What does Christian greatness look like in social circles? The founders of our church were not terribly concerned with opulent houses or celebrity sightings; in fact, with few exceptions they detested the sort of ladder-climbing of what they called the “Newport set.” Some even risked social ostracism for the sake of their neighbor, like abolitionist Sylvester Lind, who defied the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Underground Railroad. That same spirit carried on in the turbulent 1960s when people backed civil rights – like member Doris Cole Yankee who marched with King in Alabama, to great criticism of some of her peers. It’s not just civil rights either. The last thing they want is public accolades, but I was touched beyond measure when I learned of Debbie Mackenzie and Betty Toser and Jean Mohr who, with the help of Herb Anderson, leveraged their life-long church membership to convince the Session to open a Day-Care Center here in the late 60s – nearly the first day care in all of Lake County. It did not bring them worldly rewards or social approval, as many of you know. Providing childcare to working mothers who “ought” to be at home was controversial enough; bringing North Chicago and Waukegan kids to our church was over the top. But it did the trick. In less than a decade five more day care centers opened throughout Lake County, and ours was needed no more. In the words of Scripture, they “did not count their position as something to be exploited, but emptied themselves” for a greater good. Social greatness in Jesus’ book has everything to do with how we treat our neighbor.

And in the world of physical achievement, Christian greatness looks like this: taking care of yourself so you can care for others in body and soul, others who cannot care for themselves. Greatness looks like the spouses or children of older adults who care for their frail loved ones at home or visit them in nursing homes, day after day after day after day – men like my father who took care of my mother so selflessly and lovingly for so very long. Greatness looks like the volunteers who slog in Rummage each Monday and Thursday to raise money for mission; greatness looks like the people who provide meals at

Neal School or tutor at Reading Power or roll up their sleeves at the Boys & Girls Club. Greatness looks like well-educated professionals who gave up a boatload of money in the private sector to give their lives to non-profits; and others who give endlessly of their time and money as trustees to make sure that others are fed or housed, that children are educated or women in the world have the same opportunities we do.

Who says we're not supposed to strive for greatness?

Like anything else we might reach for, Christian ambition is not effortless. We can't expect to be strong Christians by joining a church and checking it off the list any more than we can expect to have strong bodies by joining a health club and not showing up. Following Christ requires the same discipline, the same purposefulness, the same commitment that every other aspiration to greatness requires. If we think we are going to become great Christians by asking Jesus to wave a magic wand and put us at his right hand, we are asking for the wrong thing.

But it is worth it. It is, in fact, worth more than anything else we could ever achieve in our lives.

How do you measure greatness? For what do you aspire? Maybe you'll need some time to think about it. Maybe you're not sure. It might be easier if you think of it this way: What brings you joy in your life – not just pleasure, but enduring joy that comes from being part of something much larger than you alone. Or maybe it looks like this: it looks like what you want for your children or grandchildren, or the young people whom you teach or coach or mentor? What do you want most for their lives? Or maybe you could think of it this way: what do you hope people say about you when you are not in earshot? What do you most hope people admire in you? Or maybe you could ask yourself this: at the end of the day, when your life is complete, what do you want your obituary to say? Do you want to be measured by the size of your estate, or your physical prowess or beauty? I doubt it. I doubt it very much.

Because last but not least, the most important question you might ask yourself is this: at the end of your life, when your last breath is over, and you go to meet your Lord, your Maker, what do you want God's greeting to be?

How about something like this: "Well done. Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of my Kingdom." Amen.