

Title: Humility or Greatness
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Theme: A Life That Counts

Did you hear about the ambitious fellow who wrote the book, “Humility and How I Achieved It?”

Much is written today about the essential qualities of greatness. World figures such as General Colin Powell, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc. come to mind as greatness is mentioned.

* Remember the “Andy Griffith Show”? Thelma Lou thought that Barney Fife was pretty great! And on “Duck Dynasty”, Uncle Si is pretty high on himself.

Greatness in our society is often defined by the house we possess, the size of our financial portfolio, or by the name recognition which we possess. In our era, the bigger the better!

Motivational speakers remind us that true greatness must first be conceived. We hear visionary chants such as, “If you don’t see it before you see it you never will see it.” From the 70’s comedian Flip Wilson instructed us, “What you see is what you get.” In other words, what is conceived may be achieved with the end result being personal greatness.

While perhaps none of us would dispute the value of a visionary approach to life, the issue of greatness involves an underlying biblical theme which must be considered—that of humility.

Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem in the 400’s BC with the goal of rebuilding the walls of the city and the hearts of the people. The wall went up in an astounding 52 days! Nehemiah had been on the job a short time when confronted with the

financially depressing conditions of most of the people. It is here that his greatness as a leader begins to emerge. Chosen as governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah displays true greatness in his response to the needs of the people. Unlike previous leaders, Nehemiah sacrificed himself as no one had ever done.

Here are three propositions regarding greatness...

I. GREATNESS IS THE FRUIT OF HUMILITY.

Neh. 5:14-15

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year--twelve years--neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. [15] But the earlier governors--those preceding me--placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.

- A. The people recognized a real leader when they saw one.
 - 1. Nehemiah says that in his twelve years as governor that he did not abuse the system.
 - 2. The system, of course, would have been funded by heavy taxation on the people.
 - 3. Nehemiah reveals his greatness.
 - 4. His attitude convinces us that this work in Jerusalem was not merely a job but a way of life, a calling from God, and as such required personal sacrifice and the commitment of his soul.

- B. Surely the people caught a glimpse of the sacrifice of Christ as they watched Nehemiah at work.
 - 1. What a shining example of a selfless person!

* "As soon as enough people give you enough compliments and you're wielding more power than you've ever had in your life, it's not that you become ... arrogant ... or become rude to people, but

you get a false sense of your own importance and what you've accomplished. You actually think you've altered the course of history."

—Actor Leonardo DiCaprio

* How can we reject this false sense of superiority? I think...

II. A FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE MARK OF GREATNESS.

Neh. 5:15 b

...But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.

- A. Leaders are often known by phrases that become commonplace in society.
 1. Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death."
 2. John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you..."
 3. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream."
 4. George Bush's "read my lips."
 5. Bill Clinton's "I didn't inhale"
 6. Nehemiah's description could have been "I did so out of my reverence for God."

- B. Nehemiah is referring here to the practice of former governors who had extracted from the people bread, wine, and forty shekels of silver as a means to support the governor's office.
 1. Nehemiah refused it.
 2. Past leaders had "dominated" (or in the Hebrew, ruled autocratically) the people and they felt the sting.

* The Romans—the culture encountered by the early church—viewed the values of strength and weakness:

Ideas of universal human dignity were almost all but nonexistent and large swathes of the population were seen as ... inherently worthless. Weak members of society were objects not of compassion but of derision. More than most, Romans lionized

strength over weakness, victory over defeat, dominion over obedience. Losers paid a harsh price and got what they deserved, and [resisters] were to be ruthlessly handled ... Roman politics became a ruthless game of total winners and abject losers ... The drive to dominate and not be forced to bow before a rival was paramount.

So the message of the cross became the enemy. We are taught that...

II. A THIRST FOR GODLY CHARACTER REPLACES THE GLAMOUR OF SUCCESS.

Neh. 5:16-18

Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

[17] Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. [18] Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

- A. Nehemiah thrust himself into the work on the wall rather than supervising from a distance.
 1. Nehemiah saw an opportunity to take advantage of cheap land prices and amass a portfolio for himself that had no match and would guarantee his financial security for sever lifetimes.
 2. Nehemiah “did not buy” any of the land.
 3. His greatness shone like a beacon for all to see.
 4. Surely they saw the love in his heart for them.

- B. The glamour of success was not his goal.
 1. Service motivated his heart.
 2. The people had a need and he would fill it.

3. In addition, he personally provided for 150 Jews and officials plus many others at his table.
4. It was a costly show of love and he dug deeply into his pocket to foot the bill.
5. Nehemiah explained that the “the demands were heavy on this people.”
6. The character of God which dwells within us is the basis for great behavior.
7. Others will see it.
8. Do they see that character surfacing in us? In you?

* A few weeks ago I shared about the character Jean Valjean from “Les Misérables”. He was a thief that became a man of admirable character. His nemesis, the policeman, lacked the character to make right choices and ultimately live with himself.

Who are you more likely to pattern your life after? How about models like Jesus, Peter, and Paul?