

True Greatness

Jesus's greatness is different from the world's greatness. We have little need to dwell on worldly greatness. We turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew and Jesus's great invitation, his great commandment, and his great commission. Gospel defined greatness is *Christ-centered*, the antithesis to self-centeredness, *all-consuming*, the antidote to consumerism, and *counter-cultural*, producing the antibodies of wisdom and obedience necessary for human flourishing.

The Great Invitation

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" - Matthew 11:28-30

Greatness begins with a humble and heartfelt acknowledgment of our dependence on God. This "come to me" invitation is predicated on Jesus's identity. He testifies to the truth about himself: "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (11:27). Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life *in person*. No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). As Peter said, "Where else do we have to go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

The exclusivity of this invitation, "Come to *me*," is matched by its inclusivity, "*all* who are weary and burdened." This open invitation is offered to a certain kind of person: those who know they are in need; those who *feel* their neediness. The person receptive to Jesus's invitation is a sinner, dead in their trespasses and sins, but Jesus does not use theological language. He uses existential language — how-we-feel language. The invitation goes out to those who feel overwhelmed, to those who are broken, bored, and cast down. They feel like failures, burdened with guilt, burned out on religion, and fatigued with life. They are tired and worn out. They are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

It is ironic that we should come to the end of our rope before we turn to God. Who would have guessed that our deep longings and our existential pain are prompted by God's grace? These bad feelings are good for us because they turn us away from self-salvation and turn us toward God's redemptive salvation.

The how-to for salvation is so counterintuitive and counter-cultural. "Here, take my yoke upon you. . . ." The yoke is a farming tool, a piece of hardware used to hook up animals so they pull and plough together. Jesus makes it an object lesson of relationship. It becomes a biblical icon of devotion and communion. Why do weary, tired, and burned-out workers need a yoke? They need a break at the beach, not work under a yoke! Bruner writes, "Jesus realizes that the most restful gift he can give the tired is a new way to carry life, a fresh way to bear responsibilities" (538). We don't need a vacation as much as we need a vocation. Instead of an escape from life, we need

a new life.

This is what makes the invitation great. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). “Come to Jesus” is not a tag line, trying to sell you something. Jesus invites you into a relationship — a partnership. In Christ we are called to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13). We are justified by simple faith to live justified.

Salvation’s vocational calling is centered in Jesus Christ. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount is the sum and substance of this new education. Jesus says in effect, “Learn *from* me, not learn *about* me.” “Jesus does not say, ‘Take my chair and learn from me’; he says, ‘Take my yoke and learn from me,’ which means that we seek to live in obedience to Jesus we learn from Jesus *along the way*” (Bruner).

Life is often hard and hurtful. Jesus promises rest for our souls. The fullness of salvation means deliverance from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.”

The meaning of rest is exceedingly positive, embracing “peace with God, access to God’s favor and presence, hope of regaining the glory intended for humankind, endurance in suffering, steadfast character, an optimistic mind, inner motivations of divine love and power of the Spirit, ongoing experience of the risen Christ and sustaining joy in God.”¹

When I think of friends who live under the yoke of Christ, Steve and Sue Befus come to mind. When I first met Steve Befus at Wheaton College, he didn’t impress me as a leader. He wasn’t very articulate and he seemed to let other people around him take the initiative. He was a big guy with an easy laugh, who didn’t take himself very seriously. But Steve was serious about serving others. His goal was to become a missionary medical doctor serving the poor in the name of Jesus. We became best friends and worked together on Wheaton’s Student Missionary Project.

Steve met Sue, who was equally serious about medical missions. They set their sights on missionary service and ministering to the poor. Steve wanted to practice grassroots medicine, working among people who would not have access to medical care apart from his service. For twenty years they gave themselves unselfishly to serving the poor in Liberia, West Africa. Under SIM (an acronym for a mission sending agency formerly known as Sudan Interior Mission), Steve headed up the medical team at ELWA hospital in Monrovia. God called Steve to serve him as physician of the body and the soul, to care for the poor, to heal the sick, to bear witness to the truth of Christ. Three times the hospital personnel had to be evacuated as rebels closed in, and three times Steve and Sue returned to rebuild a hospital looted and ransacked by the enemy he prayed for.

¹ White, “Salvation,” 968.

Steve thought he would die on the night of May 1, 1996. He and two other missionaries were stripped and ordered on the ground to be shot. But as Sue explains, “God provided another gang of rebels, who were competing for the loot, to distract and interrupt the proceedings.” Steve felt the Lord spared his life that night to provide him with extra time to serve. This gave him the sense of urgency to return to Liberia and rebuild the hospital and renew the ministry.

Many Liberians and a number of westerners recognized Steve’s outstanding leadership, but for the most part Steve’s ministry went below the radar, as God intended it to be. Steve died in 2003 after an extended struggle with cancer. In his last days he wrote to us, saying, “Many have written that they still pray for a cure, that’s fine, I sure wouldn’t mind. . . . At this stage in my life it appears that maintaining a life of faith in the months left to me will be a bigger challenge than faith for a cure.”

At his grave side, I read from Psalm 116, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” I believe the Lord highly values the life of his saints, but there is also the sense that the Lord finds the death of his saints costly. It is not only we who feel Steve’s absence but the Lord himself who pays a costly price in the death of his servant, Steve. This loss is different from the Father giving up the Son, and yet, in the mind of God, it is still related in some special way.

The Great Commandment

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40

In the middle of silencing the religious authorities, the Sadducees for their failure to comprehend the real hope of the resurrection, and the Pharisees, for their failure to recognize the true Son of David, the Messiah, Jesus gave the greatest commandment — the “Double-Love Command.” The first command directs our attention to God, who first loved us. Our love for God is always a responsive love, an answering love. The initiative belongs to God who loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:2). When Jesus says, “Love the Lord *your* God,” the whole gospel lies behind that little possessive pronoun “*your*.” Even our capacity to love belongs to God.

Jesus calls us to an all-consuming love. We are to love the Lord with our whole being, with all of our good feeling, with all of our good thinking, and with all of our good willing. From the inner core of our being we are to love God with all of our heart, with all of our mind, and with all of our soul. Every part of our critical, rational, and intelligent self, and every part of our emotional, willing, and feeling self is devoted to loving God wholeheartedly.

“This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Two distinguishable commands, prioritized, inseparable, and essential. Bruner writes, “The first is first and the second is second, but the second is equally as important as the first. Only together in a nurturing mutuality is either love kept pure. A neighbor-minimizing love of God is as reprehensible to the prophetic Jesus as a God-minimizing love of neighbor is

impossible for the pastoral Jesus” (Bruner, 414).

Salvation restores our love of God and our love of others. We cannot have one without the other. The apostle Paul draws out the personal and social significance of the gospel in Ephesians 2. Salvation is both personal and social, involving deep changes in our thinking and feeling as well as practical changes in our relationships and social commitments. The gospel of the new humanity is as social as it is personal. We preach justification and justice, peace with God and the peace of God. This is the peace of Christ that turns away the wrath of God and overcomes racial, social, class and tribal hostilities.

I met David Mensah on a hot August day in Toronto. It was rumored on campus that a new African student, who had arrived from Ghana to study at Ontario Bible College, was afraid to come out of his room. I knocked on his dormitory door and met a brother in Christ whom I would grow to deeply love and respect. I could never have imagined then that forty years later David’s leadership impact in northern Ghana would be so great. The immensity of God’s call and gifts in David’s life were concealed by the shy demeanor of a half-starved African boy who looked like a bewildered refugee locked in a prison.

Little did I know then what an extraordinary leader I was meeting. I never would have foreseen that David would complete a PhD in a theology of land use and return to Ghana with his beautiful Canadian born wife and three daughters to carry on a holistic gospel ministry to his native tribe. Today there are thousands of women, many of whom are widows, in agricultural co-ops who are earning a living because of this ministry. Scores of lay pastors have been trained and lead forty congregations scattered throughout the region. Layers of leadership bring vision and expertise to agricultural production, animal husbandry, and church planting. Schools and medical clinics have been built and a fish hatchery is in production. Lord willing in August a fifteen million-dollar hospital campus will be operational. David has played a crucial role in conflict resolution between the tribes and worked with government officials and tribal chiefs in reducing land and water pollution. Moslem chiefs, Volta fishermen, Janga farmers, and devil-worshipping shamans have come to Christ because of David’s ministry.

Chances are you have never heard of him. Like so many other indigenous Christian leaders David Mensah is not on the western church’s radar screen, much less the world’s. He is content to fly below the radar accomplishing what God has called him to do by God’s grace.

The Great Commission

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

The five “alls” of the Great Commission climax the all-consuming nature of Jesus’s greatness: all authority, all nations, all of God, all commands, and the promise of his abiding presence all of

our days. Everything is predicated on the highest view of Christ, from “come to me” to “all authority has been given unto me.” How can we begin to comprehend Christ’s power? Nothing is excluded in “all authority in heaven and on earth.” Jesus stepped forward and spoke to them. He issued his majestic commission modestly, and without a fanfare. Just as we have been invited to come, we are now commissioned to go to all the nations. We join Jesus in his coming and going. He is the Incarnate One; we are incarnational. He died on the cross for our salvation; we take up our cross for the sake of the gospel. He was raised from dead and ascended to glory. We live in the hope of his resurrection.

We are commissioned to make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the Name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything Christ commanded. This going, baptizing, teaching, and making disciples is a slow work. Disciple-making is Christ-centered, all-consuming and counter-cultural. It fulfills the Abrahamic promise of being a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-2) and Isaiah’s vision of the glory of Zion (Isaiah 54:2-3).

I first met Dan Lam in Denver. We attended the same church and Dan had a reputation for being into missions. Some of us dubbed him *the Asian invasion*, because Dan was anything but shy when it came to advancing the gospel. When I first met Dan, I had no idea who I was meeting. Few people realized the extent of his kingdom involvement. He was mobilizing hundreds of Vietnamese lay pastors, establishing a Bible training college in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, sponsoring undercover Bible training seminars in Siberia. For Dan keeping a low profile was a tactical and philosophical commitment. Dan always kept the gospel of Christ front and center.

Dan came to Christ as a boy in his native Hong Kong. His father died when he was young and he was raised by his mother, whose strength and devotion to Christ marked Dan’s life. He grew up poor, determined to work hard and be successful. Years later, Dan and his wife Grace attended a retreat hosted by John Stott, who was at the time pastor of All Soul’s Church in London. Dan was headquartered in London, working on construction projects on three continents, supervising four hundred employees. Grace calls it “that fateful retreat.” She teases that life might have been a whole lot easier if they had never attended that retreat. But in Stott’s seminar Dan and Grace became convicted about God’s Kingdom values and the believer’s gospel-centered lifestyle. They began to realize that the gospel not only converts the soul but transforms every aspect of life. Dan remained an active businessman, but his focus changed. His time, energy, and resources were used to further the Kingdom of Christ.

Dan focused his attention and passion on people who were isolated from the outreach of the gospel. I first met him when he asked me to prepare a course of study for new believers in Mongolia. I remember the first thing he said to me when he came into my office.

“I want you to disciple me. Can you do it?”

Knowing what I knew about Dan, his reputation preceding him, I said, “I think it would be better the other way around.”

“No, can you disciple me?”

“Okay, how about we disciple one another?” I proposed.

“No, I don’t have time for you. Can you disciple me? I need somebody to pray for me and

discuss God’s work. I need someone to hold me accountable.”

That encounter started a friendship, a partnership in the gospel, that took me to Mongolia four times. At our first Bible class in Mongolia the police came by on our second day and ordered us out of the building. I continued teaching the class outside in the freezing cold while Dan sped over to the mayor’s office to get proof that we had official permission to meet.

Dan’s approach to mission work may have been a bit unorthodox, but it was effective. Dan was decisive and not easily dissuaded. He was determined not to get bogged down in petty problems and manmade obstacles. He was restless for the sake of the Kingdom. He was committed to networking, facilitating, empowering and challenging a whole range of Christians from indigenous pastors in Southeast Asia, to new believers in Mongolia, to North American seminary professors. He did not want to develop a heavy organization. He wanted to reach the unreached and train nationals to reach nationals for Christ. He wasn’t interested in selling his mission field to a constituency of supporters; he wanted to develop partners who would share his passion for training new believers in hard-to-reach places.

On March 22, 1994, Aeroflot Flight 593, carrying Dan on a flight from Moscow to Hong Kong, crashed in Russia. All seventy-five on board were killed. The believing community mourned the loss of a true ambassador for Christ, but in the eyes of the world his death went unnoticed. Believers from Hong Kong and Australia flew to Denver to attend Dan’s memorial service, and believers around the world thanked the Lord for a true missionary who united vision and task in a way that glorified his Lord. At his memorial service I preached on Jesus’ words,

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

I doubt if Daniel Lam was conscious of living on the edge for Christ, but he was willing to share his passion for Christ and spend his life for the sake of the gospel. Every day was a choice between ambitions, visions, and masters—and every day Jesus won.

Greatness depends on accepting Christ’s “Come to me” invitation. It means living under the easy yoke and learning from the Lord Jesus who is always gentle and humble in heart. Greatness means loving God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. Greatness involves living under the authority of Christ and making disciples. Jesus’s greatness is nothing like the world’s greatness. Greatness is Christ-centered, all-consuming, and counter-cultural.

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