

GOALS AND STANDARDS IN THE WORLD AND IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In several of His parables, Jesus said that the kingdom of God was like features in everyday life. Its growth is like that of leaven and a mustard tree. Some things are so precious that people will sacrifice almost everything else for them. Similarly with the kingdom of God. Seed yields differently on different kinds of ground. Seed grows quietly without human assistance. Similarly with the kingdom of God. Weeds and wheat grow together and edible and inedible fish swim together, but a separation comes at the end. Similarly with the kingdom of God. When people decline an invitation, we invite others. Similarly with the kingdom of God. Businessmen expect a return on their investment. So does God in His kingdom.

However, there are aspects of the kingdom of God that are radically different from the goals and standards of the world. Employers do not usually on generosity, without regard to the number of hours an employee works. A bridegroom does not shut out girls who come late to a wedding ceremony. Financiers do not write off enormous debts without attaching conditions. Yet, that is what the kingdom of God is like.

The news media focus on examples of the goals and standards of this world. They make lists of the world's richest men. They debate whether a Member of Parliament who has misused his trust should stand down. If he has to stand down, others who have been his colleagues elbow each other for his place. When we think of great people we list leaders of countries, including totalitarian dictators, military commanders, admirals, and business tycoons.

The goals and standards of the world include ownership of property, power, and influence. We have a special regard for self-made men. They are people whose effort, good sense, foresight, and dedicated hard work have enabled them to be where they are.

When Jesus' disciples were seeking power and influence in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus said that in His kingdom such positions were prepared and granted. That eliminates all effort, earning, merit, and privilege.

When Jesus' other ten disciples found out about James and John's attempt to secure power and influence, they were indignant. They probably wanted the positions of power and prestige for themselves. He told them, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not like that among you, but whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all."

This is another aspect of the difference between the affairs of the world and the kingdom of God. God's estimate of what is great and small is different from the estimate of sinful human beings. Greatness consists in the kind of service that a slave does. A slave surrenders his will to that of his master. He can make no claims for himself he bases on property, noble birth, or power. The slave in the kingdom reminds us of Jesus' two other illustrations of those who are in the kingdom. They are only such as infants, and only beggars, who receive everything. Beggars and the infants are pictures of how people enter the kingdom. Slaves provide a picture of how those who are the kingdom should function.

Jesus won His kingdom through disgraceful surrender of Himself, and He led His disciples by way of example. In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), there are only two passages where Jesus explains the meaning of His death by crucifixion. One is this passage in Mark 10:45, with the parallel in Matthew 20:28: "For even the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom instead of many." The other is in His institution of the Lord's Supper: "given for you... the new testament in My blood... shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

Greatness in the kingdom through self-effacing service was a principle from which Jesus, the King, was not exempt. In this respect, His kingdom is also not of this world. When the eternal Son of God, who had been with the Father in creation, came to His own creation, He came in poverty and obscurity. He announced the news of His birth, not in David's capital, Jerusalem, or in Rome, but to shepherds, whom most people regarded as having an occupation that made people dishonest. After Jesus' townspeople drove Him out of Nazareth, He had no home of His own. He declined to use His power and knowledge to protect Himself. People mocked Him. Herod's and Pilate's soldiers played blind man's buff with Him, scourged Him, and then put Him to death in a disgraceful and painful public execution.

Jesus' use of the word "ransom" is crucial. His death was the price that He paid to set people free, from sin, death, and the devil. "Ransom for many", as Paul explains, really meant, "ransom instead of all." That was the meaning of His poverty, suffering, and death. He had not come merely as a teacher, but as the Sin-bearer and the Deliverer.

People of the world respond in one way to greatness in the world. Those who are in the kingdom of God

respond in another way to Jesus' servile greatness. Jesus' disciples were indignant when James and John, with their mother's help and probably her instigation, had tried to get in first. The usual reactions to the goals and standards of the world are jealousy and resentment. In Australia we refer to the conviction, "I am as good as you, mate, and would do even better if only I had the chance" as the tall-poppy syndrome. Common people think it is their right to bring tall poppies down to their level. They know themselves too well to concede that others really deserve to be so great.

However, the ideal of Jesus in His kingdom, self-effacing and self-abasing service to others, is one that does not generate jealousy and resentment. It wins His followers. It is a power that transforms. Jesus' ransom works trust in what He has done, genuine admiration, and praise. That is not all. Jesus intended that those in the kingdom should follow His example. Since, in the kingdom, earning and achieving are all His work, and since attempts to earn and achieve in the kingdom amount to a resignation from the kingdom, what counts is the "generosity of the owner of the vineyard." Humble service to others cannot be a way of attempting to earn and achieve by means of self-abasement, but a way of grateful response. We, who are in His kingdom, wear the garment of His righteousness. Our service to others becomes the way in which we advertise the wedding garment that He provides.