

This is a series called “Greatness.” Lemme tell you something about greatness, or maybe let me tell you something about you. If you’re within ten years of my age on either side, I’m 25, then you’re what I like to call a “Disney Baby.” That means that many of you grew up watching the same animated Disney movies that I watched, my personal favorite was Aladdin. Aladdin taught me that all you had to was be clever and cunning enough...and find a genie...and then you could get the girl and palace and everything. And at its surface, it’s a great pauper becomes prince story. But Disney movies (and not just Disney movies, of course, I’m not just picking on Disney, numerous other things helped along the way) were doing something to our worldview. No. This isn’t mind-control, and I don’t really buy any of those Disney conspiracy theories, but they were shaping our worldview. Here’s the worldview: You can be whoever you want to be if you just set your mind to it. Now, I’m going to go ahead and say you’re a liar if you’ve never heard that before. It’s everywhere. I just heard it on the radio coming here this morning. Some girl saying she wanted to go to law school because she believed she could do anything if she set her mind to it.

Now, is that worldview bad? Not necessarily, but it comes with a lot of dangerous baggage.

We all want to be great! We all want to be great, in fact, we spend the majority of our lives trying to be great. You want to be a great basketball player like Steph Curry? Just practice like he does in the Muscle Milk commercials. You want to be the most popular kid at school? Say and do the right things at the right times and don’t do anything weird! You want to be a better parent than yours were to you? Read all the books or blogs you can, and then implement everything you learn. You want that promotion? Work longer, harder hours and you will make the climb, or if you’re an entrepreneur, then work tirelessly, read every business book you can get your hands on and hope!

Even if you think you’re achieving some of that greatness, I imagine you’ve realized, or you will soon realize the danger in believing you can be that great. The odds of being as good as Steph Curry... Well, let me just predict that none of you are going to be as good as him. If you are, call me up, tell me I was wrong and let’s go to lunch to talk about it. You’re buying... ;) But even on the lesser things... Maybe you have taken parenting more seriously than your parents did, but are your kids turning out perfect or even close to perfect? How’s work? Do you love it? If you listen to Forbes Magazine, 52% of you don’t. Work isn’t making us feel great, and even if you somehow achieve the goals you set for yourself at work, what do you leave in the dust? Do you sacrifice your family or hobbies or the things that make you truly happy on the altar of work?

Sometimes, people try to find their greatness in themselves. Popularity is one. I don’t know if you’ve realized this...but not everyone likes you. Sorry to be the one to break it to you. Not everyone likes me. I realize that. Some people they are great if they can achieve the body

or fitness they want. But really, what is fitness? Just managing the steady decline of your ability to do stuff, right?

Here's the bottom line. We spend our lives trying to be great, but for some reason, that we can't explain, we just can't. We can't always put our finger on what's wrong, but we know something is, and we'll sacrifice just about anything to find out what it is so we can be whoever we want to be. We call it setting our mind to it, but it's really selling our happiness to try to find happiness.

People go down that path all the time. They sell the little things they enjoy in life for something that they think will make them feel better. Reminds me of Ethan. Ethan was a rising star in marketing. The guy could go to in Lambeau and convince folks to buy Chicago Bears jerseys. Everyone kept tell Ethan that he was on his way to greatness, so after high school, he went to college and poured himself in his classes. He spent the late nights not going out with his friends or trying to snag a hot girlfriend. He spent them at his desk reading everything he could about marketing. When he did talk to people, all he could talk about was the new strategy he found or maybe even thought up. Graduation came around and he got his diploma and a number of great job offers. When he got into the business, he did well, but when it came to monthly and yearly reviews, Ethan's superiors were never satisfied. The company could be further ahead, we could be spending less and making more, we should try this new form of marketing. Ethan kept putting more and more time into his job, and kept meeting expectations, until the recession of hit, and then his company had to scale back almost everything. While Ethan still had a job, he had fewer opportunities and fewer team members to manage and one night, when he was out for a drink at a bar, he realized, He had no wife, friends who only cared about him at work, no hobbies, and an extended family that he barely saw anymore. Ethan had sold his happiness for what he thought would make him happy, but it never did.

See, whether your looking to your friends, family, job, or skills for greatness, you're going to be disappointed, and I don't think that's completely lost on us. I think if we're honest, we realize that something is wrong and that no matter what we set our mind to, it never gives us the peace and happiness that we're really looking for.

Just think about how many of you complain about the best things in your life. Do you complain about your family? Some people don't have a family to be with! Do you complain about your job? Some people don't have a job. And so on... We are just never completely satisfied because we cannot find the greatness we are looking for.

Did you know that's why a lot of people hate church? There's a really good reason that a bunch of those people outside these walls aren't here today. It's because they believe that church is another place that is going to ask them to achieve greatness. They believe that church is a place where people go to try to get better. That some guy in some nice clothes is going to get up and tell them the key to being great, but attaching a list of 6 things they have to do in order to achieve it, and the sad fact is that no one wants that. They have enough to-do lists and unachieved goals as it is. They don't need more.

And here's the ugly truth on the other side. The rest of those people are afraid that I am going to be right about who they are. What I mean by that is that they're afraid that

everything I just said about your and their inability to really make it in life is true. They want the fantasy world that continues to offer them the chance to be whoever they want to be if they set their mind to it. They don't want to hear "You're a sinner" or "You have got no chance" or "You're a worse person than you think you are" or "You're a failure." People just don't want to hear that because they're afraid it might actually be true.

Friends, do you think you're pulling it off? Do you think you're keeping up with the treadmill of life? If you are, find me after church and tell me your secret, please. But I know you. You're just like me. You look in the mirror and see signs like billboards around your head that say "Weak" "Selfish" "Failure" "Fat" "Unkind" "Obsessed" "Addicted" and you can't seem to shake them.

And if we take it a step further, we realize that not only are we broken, but we are constantly breaking stuff. It's our natural inclination. The only important thing to us is what we want, and we don't care what breaks along the way. When I was a child, I learned how to crochet. I know, right? But in my eternal selflessness... I made a crocheted blanket for my three year old sister's Barbie dolls. I put hours into that thing and I was really proud of it. When I gave it to her, she was thankful and used it, but one day while we were eating dinner, my mom said, "Do you smell something burning?" We all did, so we checked the oven, and the furnace, and everything that we could check in our house until we went upstairs and found the source of the burning smell. My sister had taken the crocheted blanket and had used a rubber band to cover the lightbulb in the lamp in her room because, "It was too bright." Now, I realize she wasn't doing it maliciously, but the point is that her sinful nature said, "What I want is most important. Who cares what happens along the way?"

You break stuff too. Except you're not 3, and you break big stuff. Relationships, people, opportunities, marriages. Do your kids avoid you? Do your friends exclude you? We are broken and we break stuff, and for some reason, we keep telling ourselves that we can fix it all. We can't do it. You can't do it.

That's what Paul is getting at in Romans chapter 8, friends. He's trying to tell you what greatness is, and look at what he says. **"In the same way..."** Hold on... We gotta go back. In the same way as what? Well, right before this, Paul writes, **"We know the whole creation has been groaning..."** and **"We ourselves groan inwardly..."** Sounds like us right? Groaning over what our life is. But then Paul writes, **"The Spirit helps us in our weakness."**

Weakness. No one says, "If I set my mind to it, I can be weak." But here's the truth, God is not here to help people who think they've got it. He leaves those people to fail enough times that they finally come back to him to admit they are the worst. Friends, admit you've got a problem! Admit that you're not great! Admit that you're a failure because here's the crazy secret. Giving up on yourself is the first step to freedom. God wants you to give up on yourself. Here's why...

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Ok, before we go any farther, I want to help you understand this verse, because it is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. This verse is not say, "Everything that happens in your life is working out so your life will be better." That's just false. There are Christians who die from starvation or sicknesses that we have

cures for here in the U.S. Is this promise not true for them? And you, for some of you, your life might not get much better. You might never get to fix the things you've broken in this world, you might never find happiness in your stuff or your friends or your job. While it is true that God watches out for us and blesses us with so many blessings, this verse is simply not saying that everything in this life is going to be peachy. In fact, you can see that in the words. The Greek word that Paul uses for "know" is a word that is just head knowledge. Like, I know that when I flip a light switch, lights go on. I'm not sure exactly how circuits and breakers and alternating currents work, but I "know" that it works. That's what God is saying. You may never see the good that he is working for on earth. God says, just trust me on this one, and to understand what God is truly saying, we have to look at what follows it.

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." See, every element of Romans 8:28 is informed by something in the verses around it. So let's break it down.

"In all things." In the time you are on this earth, God says all he knows all the bad stuff, even the stuff you can't explain to him in prayer. Your failures, your brokenness, the things you break, the things that happen to you. They're all things that happen to every Christian. All the things that happen are brush strokes that are creating a perfect painting of eternal good for you.

It says, "God works for the good." God's work is foreknowing you, predestining you, calling you, justifying you, and glorifying you. When it says God "foreknew you" it's a different word than Paul used about when he said that "we know." This word is a word that means to know something because you have experienced it, held it in our hands, been intimately involved with it. God knew you before he created the world. He knew your name, your likes, your dislikes, your weaknesses, your strengths, your future, your past, the things you were going to mess up, and he still said, "I want that one." Because he loved you that much, he said, "I will make all things work out so this one will be one of mine." That's the predestining you to be like Jesus. No to-do lists, just God working for you. Because God chose you, he gave you a savior in Jesus so you could be perfect to him, and called you by name in your baptism to be justified, forgiven. And because he did all that, you are glorified. Notice...past tense! You are glorified right now. This moment. God sees you and doesn't see a failure or angry, broken person. He sees Jesus when he sees you. That's the good God has worked for you.

Who is noticeably absent from this section? You are. Oh sure, you're there, but you aren't doing anything. You aren't working things, or calling out to God, or justifying yourself, or getting glory and greatness for yourself. God's doing it all. Grace is like that, brothers and sisters. It's the most illogical concept ever, but it's beautiful. God loves you, knowing what you've done, and even what you're going to fail at, and then makes an eternal pact with himself that you are his no matter what.

Now, since all that is true, we need to understand a big thing that Paul is getting at here. We are all just beggars before God. We have had our walls broken down so we finally acknowledge the truth that has been there forever. We are sinful, but God saves bad people

because God loves bad people. So, let's just sit down together at the foot of God with Paul and just let the rest of this text sink into our hearts. You've got the foundation of what this section is about. Let's read it.

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” If everything Paul says is true, nothing can change your destiny. You're saved. Done deal! **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** Everything that God has in heaven. Those are the only things that really matter, and God's given you a promise that they will be yours. **Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.”** Not even you. God has said you are forgiven and loved. Jesus is not going to die again. He doesn't have to. Your past, present, and future are all forgiven. No one can bring a charge against you. **“Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”** Jesus is sitting next to the judge in the courtroom watching your life and whenever you sin, he leans over to the Father and says, “I died for that sin, too.” And here are my favorite verses in the whole Bible. **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”** Our life is facing death, trouble, hardship, persecution, lacking things, and all sorts of danger, but none of those things can change your status with God. **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”** Friends, call yourself a conqueror, but not in this life. Your life is not greatness, even if you achieve worldly greatness. True greatness is that the God who created the world loves you despite your ability to give him every reason to leave you. Greatness is the promise that at the end of life, you will conquer sin, and death, and Satan forever because Jesus loves you and won that victory in your place. Because that is true, I, like Paul, **“am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** No ifs ands or buts. Call yourself a conqueror. God did and he will never change his mind.