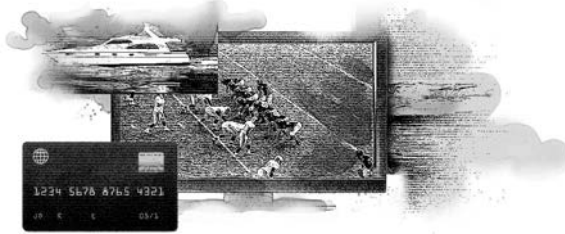


# Idols of the Soul (and Other Lessons From Jesus)




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eccles. 9:10; Matt. 18:1–4; Matt. 18:21–35; 19:16–30; Gal. 3:21, 22; Matt. 19:27.*

**Memory Text:** “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ” (*Matthew 18:1, NIV*).

As human beings, we are products of our environment, of our culture. These greatly shape our values, beliefs, and attitudes. Whether you were raised in a big metropolitan area or in a village with no clean water, it makes no difference: the culture, the environment that you grew up in, has greatly made you what you are. And even if you are able to go to a new environment, the one you have been raised in will leave its mark on you until the grave.

Unfortunately, to some degree, most of our environments and cultures work against the principles of God’s kingdom. The world, after all, is a fallen world, and its values, morals, and customs often reflect that fallen state. What else would they reflect? It’s just so hard for us to see because we are so immersed in our culture and environment.

The work of God in our hearts is, among other things, to point us to the values, morals, and standards of God’s kingdom. As we will see this week, those values, morals, and standards often differ greatly from what we have been born into and reared in. The disciples had to learn these lessons; we do too.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 28.

## The Greatness of Humility

Who doesn't aspire to greatness? That is, who doesn't want to be great or do great things? This desire doesn't always have to arise from selfishness or from ego or arrogance. It could simply be doing the very best that you can at whatever you do, hoping perhaps that what you do could even bring blessings upon others. (See also *Eccles. 9:10.*)

The problem, however, comes in defining "greatness." How easy for our fallen human minds to understand the concept in a way that vastly differs from God's view.

**Read** Matthew 18:1–4. According to Jesus, what is true greatness, and how are we to understand it in a way that we can apply it to our own lives?

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To define true greatness, Jesus called a child to stand before Him and said, "Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (*Matt. 18:4, NKJV*). Jesus didn't talk about being a great preacher, or a great businessman, or even a great philanthropist. Greatness, in the sight of God, is what we are inside, not what we do externally, though no doubt what's inside will impact what we do externally.

Notice, Jesus defines greatness in a way that most people in the world don't. After all, who wakes up one day and decides that the greatness he or she wants in life is to be as humble as a little child? It seems strange to us to aspire to something like that, but this is only because we are so tainted by the world's principles, ideas, and concepts.

What does it mean to be humble like a little child? One of the indicators of humility is obedience, putting God's Word ahead of our own will. If you are on the wrong path in your life, then that's because you're on your own path. The solution is simple: humble yourself and get back on God's path through obedience to His Word. If Adam and Eve had stayed humble, they would not have sinned. It's interesting to consider that the tree of life and the tree of knowledge were both located in the middle of the Garden. Often life and destruction aren't far apart. The difference is humility.

**What are some other attitudes and ideas we hold only because of our contact with the world, attitudes and ideas that are in conflict with the Word of God? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

## The Greatness of Forgiveness

One of the worst consequences of the Fall is seen in interpersonal relationships. From Adam trying to blame Eve for his sin (*Gen. 3:12*) to this moment on earth today, our race has been ravaged and degraded by conflict between individuals. Unfortunately, conflicts are not just in the world but in the church, as well.

**Read** Matthew 18:15–35. What does Jesus tell us here? Why, though, do we often not follow His words to us?

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Let’s face it: it’s easier to go behind someone’s back to complain about him or her than to go directly to the person and deal with the issue. And that is precisely why we don’t want to do it, despite being told to do it by the Lord. Yet, Jesus teaches us to go directly to someone who has hurt us and to attempt to restore the relationship. If the person is not receptive, then there are additional instructions.

“ ‘For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them’ ” (*Matt. 18:20, NKJV*). Look at the context here; it is about the discipline and restoration of another person. (We tend to apply this verse more broadly.)

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is present when a small group is attempting to restore a believer. This is the beautiful work of Redemption. And it begins with humbly doing the right thing and talking directly with someone who has hurt you. This, too, would be another example of greatness in those who do it.

**Read** Matthew 18:21–35 again. What crucial point is Jesus making?

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When Jesus says to forgive “seventy times seven,” what He’s really saying is that we must never stop forgiving someone. Jesus is serious about the necessity of forgiveness, not only for others’ benefit but for our own. Look at how strong the parable is that He told to make His point. We can be forgiven a lot of things; that’s what the gospel is all about, forgiveness (*see Exod. 32:32, Acts 5:31, Col. 1:14*), but if we don’t forgive others the way we have been forgiven by God, we can face dire consequences.

**Why is it so important, then, to dwell upon the Cross, upon the forgiveness that we have been given because of it? If God did this for you, if this is what it took to forgive you, how can you learn to forgive others, no matter how impossible that forgiveness might now appear to be?**

## Idols of the Soul

**Read** Matthew 19:16–30. As New Testament Christians, how are we to relate to this story today? What lessons can we take from it for ourselves?

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Though not much is told us specifically about this man, we can pick up a few salient points. He was rich, a ruler (*see Luke 18:18*), and apparently a very scrupulous follower of God's law. We can see, too, that he sensed something was missing from his life. It reminds one a bit of the story of Martin Luther; though outwardly a pious monk, inside he was dissatisfied with his spiritual life, and he struggled with assurance of salvation. In both cases, the men sensed that the great gap between themselves and God was not going to be filled by their outward works.

"This ruler had a high estimate of his own righteousness. He did not really suppose that he was defective in anything, yet he was not altogether satisfied. He felt the want of something that he did not possess. Could not Jesus bless him as He blessed the little children, and satisfy his soul want?"—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 518.

Some people might argue that, in this story, Jesus is teaching that we receive eternal life based on our good works. After all, in Matthew 19:17 Jesus says, "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments" (*NIV*). If this were the only text on that subject, one could make an argument here. But too many other texts, especially in Paul's writings, teach that the law does not save but rather points to our need of salvation (*see Rom. 3:28; Gal. 3:21, 22; Rom. 7:7*). Instead, Jesus must have been guiding this man to see his own great need of more than what he was doing. After all, if keeping the law alone could do it, then the man would already have salvation, since he was scrupulous in keeping it. The gospel needs to penetrate the heart, to go right to the idols of the soul, and whatever we are holding on to that's an impediment to our relationship to God needs to be gone. In this case, it was his money. Jesus notes how hard it is for a rich man to be saved; and yet, shortly after this dialog, Luke records a beautiful story of exactly that happening (*see Luke 19:1–10*).

**If you were in the position of the rich man, and you asked Jesus the same question, what do you think He would say to you? Dwell on the implications of your answer.**

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## What's in It for Us?

Right after the incident with the rich ruler, what happens?

“Then Peter answered and said to Him, ‘See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?’ ” (*Matt. 19:27, NKJV*).

Nothing in the text says what prompted this question, but it could easily be in direct response to the rich man’s departure from Jesus. Peter seemed to be implying that, unlike this man and others who either rejected Jesus or stayed with Him a while and then left, he and the other disciples had left all for Him. They were remaining faithful to Him, even at great personal cost. Thus, the question is, *What’s in it for us?*

From our perspective today, we might see this question as another indication of how hard-hearted and spiritually dense the disciples were (and to some degree that’s true). On the other hand, why not ask a question like Peter’s? Why shouldn’t he wonder what he would get by following Jesus?

After all, life here is hard, even for those who have it the best. We are all subject to the traumas, the disappointments, the pain of our fallen existence. In the 1800s, an Italian intellectual named Giacomo Leopardi wrote about the overriding unhappiness of human beings, saying that “as long as man feels life, he also feels displeasure and pain.”

Life is often a struggle, and the good in this world doesn’t always even out with the bad. So, Peter’s question makes perfect sense. *Because life is hard, what advantage comes to us from following Jesus? What should we expect from making the kind of commitment that Jesus asked of us?*

**How** did Jesus respond to the question? See *Matt. 19:28–20:16*.

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Notice, Jesus didn’t rebuke Peter for selfishness or the like. He gave him first a very straightforward answer and then the parable regarding the workers and their wages. Though over the centuries a great deal of discussion has ensued over the meaning of the parable, the basic point is clear: we will get from Jesus what He has promised us.

**If someone were to ask you, “What will I get by serving Jesus?” what would you answer?**

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## “We Are Able”

To truly appreciate today’s story about James and John (and their mother) in Matthew 20:20–27, first read Luke 9:51–56. This event occurred when Jesus and His disciples at first set out for Jerusalem, just days before James and John asked if they could sit on Jesus’ left and right in the kingdom.

**Read** Matthew 20:20–27. What does Luke 9:51–56 tell us about how ready James and John were to sit on the left and right of Jesus in the kingdom?

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James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were still clearly more worried about their own future than about the salvation of those around them, even after they had been sent out to evangelize the surrounding areas. In its own way, this story is somewhat like what we looked at yesterday, with Peter’s question regarding what they could get by following Jesus.

Look carefully at Jesus’ answer here. “ ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ ” (*Matthew 20:22, NKJV*). In other words, to be identified with Jesus’ future glory means, first, to be identified with His suffering and death, something that they had not anticipated and were not ready for. The fact that they immediately answered, “ ‘We are able’ ” (*Matt. 20:22*) shows that they didn’t know what He was warning them about. They would learn, eventually.

An interesting contrast is presented here, one that we need to think about for ourselves. As we saw in yesterday’s study, we have been promised wonderful things, even “eternal life” (*Matt. 19:29, NKJV*), if we follow Jesus. At the same time, too, the Bible makes it clear that in this world, following Jesus comes with a cost, sometimes a very big one. Jesus Himself later told Peter that he would die a martyr’s death (*see John 21:18, 19*). Many believers throughout history, and even today, have paid a great price for following Jesus. In fact, it might be wise to ask ourselves if there is something wrong with our walk if indeed we have not paid a steep price for following the Lord. Whatever the price, though, it’s cheap enough.

**What has following Christ cost you? Think hard on the implications of your answer.**

**Further Thought:** Through the centuries some people have argued for what is sometimes called “natural law.” Though it comes in many shapes and forms, the idea is that we can derive from the natural world moral principles that can help guide our actions. In one sense, as Christians who believe that nature is God’s “Second Book,” we could accept that there’s *some* truth to this. For instance, see Paul’s discourse in Romans 1:18–32 about what people should have learned about God from the natural world. At the same time, too, we can’t forget that this is a fallen world, and we view it with fallen, corrupted minds. So, it should be no surprise that we could come away with wrong moral lessons from nature. For example, one of the greatest mortal minds in antiquity, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, argued for slavery based on his understanding of nature. For him, nature revealed two classes of people, one of which was as “inferior to others . . . as . . . a beast to a man.” So for them, a “life of slavish subjection is advantageous.” This is just one of many examples we can find of how worldly principles, values, and ideas conflict with those of God’s kingdom, which is why—regardless of where we were born and brought up—we need to study God’s Word and from it derive the morals, values, and principles that should govern our lives. Nothing else, of itself, is reliable.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus calls us to forgive all who hurt us. This includes our own families. Think about someone close to you who has hurt you. Though your scars might always be there, how do you reach a point where you can forgive?
- 2 In class, discuss your answer to Sunday’s questions about the clash between your society’s values and those of the Bible. How are we as Christians to work through these differences?
- 3 Dwell more on the idea of greatness as having the humility of a child. What does this mean to us as Christians?
- 4 As Seventh-day Adventists we believe in obeying God’s law, the Ten Commandments, and rightly so. What, though, should the story of the rich ruler tell us about why, however important outward obedience to God’s law is, it’s not enough, and that true Christianity, while including obedience to the law of God, includes more?

## Coming Home: Part 1

I was introduced to the Seventh-day Adventist Church when my mother married a Seventh-day Adventist. I was in my early teens when I started attending the Adventist Church. The two things that kept me coming were the Sabbath School and Pathfinder leaders and the great programs they planned. They were so good that we kids never wanted to miss! And we knew that if we missed a week or two, we would get a visit, sometimes from the whole Sabbath School class!

By the time I was 15, my parents were no longer going to church, but I kept going because I loved it so much.

The Pathfinders were planning a camporee, and I wanted to go. The pastor drove me home so I could ask my stepdad if he would pay my way to go to the camporee. But instead of encouraging me, he told me I should spend my time studying instead of going camping. Then he said if I really wanted to go on this camporee, I could pack my things—right then—and leave for good. I gathered my things together and went home with the pastor.

My mom's marriage failed, and she lost interest in church. But I had found something I wasn't willing to give up. I moved in with my grandmother. Even though Grandma wasn't an Adventist, she encouraged me to attend church.

Throughout those difficult teen years, the church pastor and church members were my family. But the pastor left the following year, and I felt as if I had lost my own father. Things weren't the same after that, and in time I attended church less often.

My grandmother worked hard weaving mats and making handicrafts to send me to a good school. I hated to see her struggle, so I asked the school for help. The priest who ran the school told me that they would help me financially if when I finished and got a job, I would pay them back. I decided to do this. I went home and told my grandmother that I had a scholarship. I knew this wasn't really true, but I wanted to help her. I kept my promise, and when I graduated I got a job to repay the school.

But the school wasn't always a good influence on me. Some of the alumni encouraged athletes to drink alcohol. This started me on some bad habits. I was enjoying the benefits of my athletic abilities, but in the back of my mind I knew what was right and wrong, and my conscience bothered me.

*To be continued in next week's Inside Story.*



## *The Lesson in Brief*

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▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 18:1*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand how Heaven measures greatness compared with how humankind measures greatness.

**Feel:** Sense God's recognition for authentic greatness and crave His acknowledgment above all human accolades.

**Do:** Pursue a service-oriented life, expecting nothing in return for kindnesses extended.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Genuine Greatness Is Determined by Christ's Teachings Rather Than Human Standards.**

**A** How can we know when human standards have supplanted heavenly requirements?

**B** What would authentic greatness look like compared with earthly substitutions?

**C** What characteristics of Jesus' lifestyle demonstrated His greatness?

**II. Feel: Heaven's Acknowledgment Far Outweighs Earthly Rewards.**

**A** During early childhood how important was parental recognition compared with other awards? What might this imply about our relationship with our heavenly Father?

**B** How can Christian disciples experience genuine humility without becoming proud of their humbleness?

**C** How might believers share this feeling of authentic greatness with other believers? With those not yet believers?

**III. Do: Authentic Greatness Is Expressed Through Humble Service.**

**A** Why should believers avoid situations whereby their motivation for serving might involve desires for human recognition?

**B** What unnoticed actions might be done this week that might magnify God's greatness rather than ours?

▶ **Summary:** Authentic greatness is achieved not by seeking human notice but by humbly submitting to God's leading through Christian service.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Matthew 18:1–4*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Those desiring authentic kingdom greatness must become like children in attitude and demonstrate loving service toward everyone.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize to the class that genuine greatness is not about self but about focusing attention on Christ through loving actions.

**Opening Activity:** Bring some light source(s) (candle, flashlight, sunlight) with some reflectors (mirrors, vehicle reflectors, etc.) to class. (To do this activity without visual aids, ask the class to name light sources and visualize them instead.) Then ask, “Which bears more importance—the light source or the reflectors? What significance does the reflector have without the light source? How valuable is the reflector without light?” Make the spiritual application: “Which bears more importance—Christ or His disciples? What greatness or value do disciples possess apart from their Light, Jesus Christ?”

**Consider This:** Why are truly great people *not* worried about achieving greatness?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Olympic medallions, civic recognitions, military honors, and other trophies reflect humankind’s need for acknowledgment. How ironic that the greatest Human who ever lived “gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled Himself in obedience to God, and died a criminal’s death” (*Phil. 2:7, 8, NLT*).

Survey your typical seventh graders about their ambitions: “doctor,” “scientist,” “president,” “Nobel Prize winner,” “beauty queen,” “distinguished actor,” “famous athlete” would be typical responses. “Electrocuted criminal” usually is not. Yet, Christ’s journey to greatness involved humiliation, suffering, misunderstanding, ridicule, and, ultimately, death. Without the cachet of worldwide travel, governmental status, military position, academic degrees, social standing, or financial attainments, Christ achieved a greatness that is unmatched in human history. What should believers learn from Jesus’ example?

## Bible Commentary

### I. Biblical Greatness *(Review Matthew 18:1–4 with the class.)*

Studying the parallel passages in Mark’s and Luke’s narratives offers additional insights into Matthew’s record. Mark’s story (*Mark 9:33–38*) remembers bickering among Christ’s disciples regarding who would occupy the greatest position within Christ’s government. When Christ confronted them about their “deliberations,” they refused to answer, ashamed about what their ambitions might reveal about their characters.

Luke’s retelling (*Luke 9:46–48*) indicates that Jesus recognized what spurred their disputation. Understanding clearly His disciples’ motivations, Jesus leads an anonymous youngster into their midst, saying, “Unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven” (*Matt. 18:3, 4, NLT*).

This “turning” comes from the Greek root *strepheo*, which sometimes means “turn around” and is metaphorically applied to conversion. The disciples’ self-centered jockeying for position actually moved them away from Christ’s kingdom. Some dramatic reversal was immediately necessary should Jesus’ closest followers be afforded any chance of joining His kingdom. They imagined that they were positioning themselves for greatness, while, in reality, they were positioning themselves for exclusion.

What follows offers insight into attaining authentic greatness. Forgiveness also constitutes another divine prerequisite for greatness. Indeed, Matthew indicates a divine prerequisite for salvation. “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (*Matt. 6:14, 15, NLT*). Regardless of the offense, forgiveness is not optional. Murder, adultery, robbery, slander—all notable transgressions—must receive forgiveness if authentic repentance happens. Otherwise, the offended person is saying, “These offenses against me exceed my wrongdoing against Christ. Although forgiven myself, I need not forgive others.”

**Consider This:** Why are forgiveness and humility requisite for attaining greatness in the kingdom of God? What did Jesus mean when He said that those who sought to enter His kingdom must become like little children?

### II. The Lost Sheep *(Review Matthew 18:12–35 with the class.)*

Christ begins this discourse by sharing the parable of the wandering sheep, commonly called “lost” sheep. This unfortunate mistranslation subtly shifts responsibility away from the sheep. The Greek *planao* means “wandering,”

“going astray,” “being misled.” Such wanderers are participants in their vanishing. Whenever keys vanish, they remain blameless. Keys have never sprouted legs and wandered away. Losing keys is solely someone’s responsibility. Whenever disobedient children disappear on shopping trips, however, active wandering causes their disappearance. They bear a share in the responsibility for their vanishing. The sheep in Christ’s parable, representing believers, actively wander away. They are not blameless. But Christ pursues active wanderers, working overtime to reestablish relationships, although He bears no responsibility for their transgressions.

Subsequent verses outline Christ’s restorative process among believers. Unfortunately, most Christians ignore these powerful verses. Initially, the wandering individual is approached privately. Should restoration happen during this initial approach, additional action becomes unnecessary. In case this private approach fails, a small group of leaders approaches the wanderer. Again, should restoration occur, further action becomes unnecessary. However, should both approaches prove unsuccessful, the offending individual faces the entire church. Hopefully, restoration takes place. However, should this offender remain belligerent, the church’s only option becomes exclusion.

Following this outline, Christ gives another memorable parable. Illustrating the meaning of forgiving seventy times seven, Jesus’ narrative recalls an incident wherein a well-positioned slave, who apparently managed the king’s finances, was held responsible for a sizable shortfall, which stretched far beyond possible repayment. Distressed by this debt, the king orders the slave’s sale, together with his family. The slave pleads for mercy. Filled with compassion, the king relents.

An interesting exchange takes place, which is obscured in translation. Matthew 18:24 uses debt language, calling the offending slave *debtor* (*opheiletēs*). However, when forgiving the servant, his shortfall is referred to as a *loan* (*daneion*) (*Matthew 18:27*). How gracious! Later the forgiven servant meets another servant who owes him money. Rather than replicating the graciousness extended toward himself, this man demands immediate repayment and has the other servant imprisoned. When other servants report his actions, the king revokes his pardon. Rather than palliating the offense, using the word *loan*, the king returns to debt language (*opheilēn*). The ungrateful servant is then directed to the tormenters (Greek: *basanistais*—not merely jailers, as indicated with some translations). Jesus says this is what believers may expect if they do not extend heartfelt forgiveness.

**Consider This:** Why are the lost sheep implicated in their wandering? How does the parable of the king’s wicked servant reveal God’s grace and the gratitude we owe Him for His forgiveness for our sins? How do the two different words for debt in the Greek in the parable reveal His attitude toward the debt repentant souls owe Him?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** The self-righteous attitude displayed by unforgiving

Christians is only one form of idolatry. The wealthy young ruler of Matthew 19 idolized his moral record *and* his extensive financial holdings. Others idolize their academic achievements, their personal fame or influence, even their religious piety! Whatever our idols may be, they place roadblocks in the pathway to genuine greatness.

#### Thought Questions:

- ❶ How do believers dismantle their cultural backgrounds so that Christ's definition of greatness can replace worldly definitions?
- ❷ What lessons can we learn from children that might foster humility?
- ❸ Earthly achievements are rewarded with trophies and pay increases. What rewards accompany genuine greatness?

#### Application Questions:

- ❶ What realistic attitude changes would encourage less self-dependence and more God-dependent humility?
- ❷ How can we cultivate confident attitudes about life without glorifying ourselves, as Nebuchadnezzar did?
- ❸ How does the nature of prayer protect us from becoming overconfident?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Distribute something on which to write, for example, 4 x 6-inch cards, along with writing instruments. Have members list the world's "top five" indicators of greatness. (Alternately, you can compose the list verbally.) There is no correct list, but hopefully some consensus will emerge. Things such as wealth, influence, celebrity, academic achievements, and so on, will likely surface. Opposite the "worldly list," ask participants to suggest five characteristics of biblical greatness.

#### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How does life's preparation for worldly greatness differ from preparation for biblical greatness?
- ❷ How should believers share the rewards of biblical greatness as compared with how non-Christians distribute the benefits of worldly greatness?
- ❸ How will biblical greatness outlast the outcomes of worldly greatness?
- ❹ How might hearing Christ's "Well done, faithful servant" be compared with human acknowledgments for athletic, academic, or sales achievements?