

In 2001, business and leadership writer Jim Collins wrote the bestselling book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. Collins conducted research on 11 companies that had "made the leap" and chronicled why "good is the enemy of great." Business leaders and even church leaders gobbled up this book and had their organizations read it in order to move them toward "greatness." Collins defined "greatness" as "distinctive impact" and "superior performance" shepherded by a "level five leader."

It's no wonder the book was so popular. Americans love greatness. It's no coincidence that one of the major slogans of the recent presidential campaign was "Make America Great Again." The idea is that if you're not yet great, you have work to do. The problem, however, is that greatness isn't easy to sustain. Of the 11 "great" companies that Collins profiled in his wildly popular book, most are "not so great" a decade and a half later:

- + Circuit City, one of the most successful companies profiled in the book, went out of business in 2009, buried by competition from Best Buy and online retailers.
- + The Federal National Mortgage Association had to be bailed out by the government during the mortgage crisis, and is seen by many as contributing to the cause of the crisis in the first place.
- + Pitney Bowes was half its 2001 market cap in 2012.
- + Five of the companies (Abbott Labs, Kimberly-Clark, Kroger, Walgreens and Wells Fargo) have done okay but with only modest market gains.
- + One of the companies (Gillette) was sold.
- + Only Nucor (a steel producer) and Philip Morris (the tobacco producer) have remained "great" according to Collins' criteria.

It would be easy to scoff in hindsight at Collins' research but most books like this illustrate the principle that 'past results do not always predict future performance.' But it does raise a question. *Is greatness really the best goal for an organization, a nation, a business or a church?* The prophet Micah didn't seem to think so. When we turn to the Scriptures, one of the things we realize is that greatness is vastly overrated. In fact, rather than the good being the enemy of the great, biblically speaking, *greatness is actually the enemy of goodness.*

Micah wrote to the nation of Judah during a time when the nation was under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been swallowed up by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and Jerusalem itself was saved only because its king, Hezekiah, paid off the invaders. The people would have remembered when they were once a great nation, and may have wondered how to get that back again. Indeed, that's one of the overarching themes of Micah. It recalls Genesis 12, where God promised Abraham that his offspring would become a "great" nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

But greatness is contingent upon consistency over time, and Israel demonstrated that it could not sustain that greatness. The kingdom that had reached its height of greatness during the days of David and Solomon. At the time of Micah, it was now a shadow of its former self, divided and conquered. Micah chronicles how the nation had gone off the rails with oppression of the poor, corruption in its courts, dishonest economic practices, false prophets, greedy priests, loss of order and, most tellingly, a rejection of God's justice and God's commandments.

Micah reminds them: God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God delivered them from their enemies. Yet, they rejected the very One who saved them. How could they possibly be blessed, let alone be a blessing to the nations? They were no longer great and no longer good, either.

Through the prophet, God delivers judgment on the nation, but, as always with God in the prophetic literature, that judgment is also tempered with hope. God tells the people that they will be restored. But how will it happen?

Well, we learn first that it won't be because they achieve greatness in their religious practices. "With what shall I come before the LORD and bow myself before God on high?" asks the prophet (v. 6). "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (v. 7). This was sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins on a grand scale. But was that superior religious performance the thing that God really desired of them then? Is it what God wants from us now?

Today we might ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show him that we're successful? Is bigger, better, faster and stronger the sign of the kind of church God blesses? The kind of nation God blesses? Is greatness what God is after?"

Micah says no. Notice what he says (v. 8): "He has told you, O mortal, what is *good*." What does the Lord desire? Goodness, not greatness. It's been God's desire all along, from the very first moments of creation, when God saw everything and called it *good*. So what does such goodness look like? How do we measure it?

Well, first the prophet says that goodness begins with doing justice (v. 8). The Hebrew word *mispat* refers to God's order for all of life. To "do justice," in other words, means that we order all of our lives, including our interactions with others, in accordance with God's will.

God is the one who sets the standard of goodness, and nothing we say or do can be good if it is not said or done according to his will. Goodness is something that is all of God, whereas 'greatness' is what we humans attempt. When we "do justice" it's a recognition that goodness is defined by what God wills and empowers, and not by what we want or desire.

Micah builds on "justice" then by saying that *true goodness is also the result of loving "kindness"* (v. 8). The Hebrew word *hesed* is sometimes translated as "kindness" or "mercy," but it is primarily a word connected to faithfulness to God and to others. The word is often used to convey God's "steadfast," faithful love for his people. Being good thus means that we maintain faithfulness to God in all things and demonstrate that faithfulness by our steadfast love for God and for all God's people.

God requires *faithfulness*, not just intellectual expressions of faith. Faithfulness looks more like following than thinking. We remember the covenant God makes with us in our baptism and we live it out day to day in all that we say and do. We are called to love such faithfulness and carry it out in community with God and each other.

And lastly, Micah says, *being good means walking humbly with our God* (v. 8). The Hebrew word *hasenea* means more than simple modesty and humility, however. It implies attentiveness, or paying attention to God. The people are to watch God for what is good and not do their own thing and call it good.

Granted, it's tempting to go after greatness. Greatness gets your name on the cover of the magazine. But God doesn't require greatness -- only goodness.

The early Christian church seemed to have embraced a goodness-over-greatness strategy for its own growth. In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, historian Alan Kreider looked at the rapid growth of the early church and wanted to see what exactly caused the church to grow during a time when it was underground and persecuted. We would expect him to find that it was about measures of greatness -- grand evangelism strategies, great preaching, attractive worship, superior leadership, better methods -- all things that we measure and value in a good-to-great culture.

But the truth is that, in every case, Kreider discovered that the real virtue that caused the early church to grow was *patient faithfulness*. They spent up to three years examining people before admitting them to membership, during which they trained them in faithfulness and to represent the character of Christ. Interestingly, their documents reveal that they didn't have much of a focus on evangelism or on preaching. Instead, it was about cultivating faithfulness and building up people who looked like Jesus.

They attracted others not because of their success but because of their character. In other words, they focused on goodness, not greatness. *They measured success by growing good people rather than by growing a great church.*

That's our measurement as well. Are we doing justice, seeking the will of God in everything we do? Do we love faithfulness, living out the covenant with God we made in our baptism? And are we walking humbly, paying attention to what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us? That's what the Lord requires of us.

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