

Descending to Greatness

be last

JEREMY KINGSLEY



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Be Last: Descending to Greatness

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What People Are Saying about *Be Last*

My good friend Jeremy has done it once again! He has encouraged us to not only *know* that there is abundant life beyond ourselves, but to know *how* to find and achieve that abundant life. We discover it by following Jesus' example of dying to ourselves and putting others before us. Jeremy kindly reminds us all of this great message. —**MAC POWELL**, LEAD SINGER, THIRD DAY

Every generation needs the truth of God's Word presented and applied in fresh, new ways. Jeremy Kingsley is just the dynamic voice to do that for today, and his heart and passion are on vivid display in *Be Last*. You'll love Jeremy's unique personal style, but what's more important, you will be powerfully challenged and inspired to come alive and live the life, the abundant life Jesus came to give. —**WES STAFFORD**, PRESIDENT AND CEO, COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL

Being last, or at least being willing to be last, is the way you struggle upward toward first place in God's view of success. There is no humility without humiliation, said Bernard Clairvaux. Still, God doesn't want anyone to end up last. It's just that last is the springboard by which we dive upward into heaven's esteem. Jeremy Kingsley has made it clear that, spiritually speaking, gravity is a lie. Gethsemane, it is true, put a lot of downward stress on the majesty of Christ. But isn't it amazing, the grave was completely without gravity on Easter morning! And when the last rocks have trembled and Christ stands belted at the chest with golden

splendor, Kingsley will have proved to all of us that we serve a Savior who wasn't afraid to wade through humiliation on the way to exaltation. —**CALVIN MILLER**, SPEAKER, PAINTER, AND AUTHOR OF MORE THAN FORTY BOOKS OF THEOLOGY AND INSPIRATION

A lover of God and a student of God's Word, Jeremy Kingsley is passionate about serving Jesus and others with life-altering truth! The application of these pages could alter an entire generation. I've been an eyewitness of Jeremy's commitment to the message of this book while he powerfully served as a lead itinerant speaker with Kingdom Building Ministries. With inspiring energy and experience, Jeremy writes from the depths of his own heart and journey! —**DWIGHT ROBERTSON**, PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, KINGDOM BUILDING MINISTRIES

In *Be Last: Descending to Greatness*, Jeremy Kingsley drives home one of my deepest principles of life and leadership: *It's not about you*. Jeremy's love of Jesus and the Bible shines through in every chapter, and his message speaks directly to the reader as if it were a personal conversation. Live your life with a servant's heart. Read this book. —**KEN BLANCHARD**, COAUTHOR OF *THE ONE MINUTE MANAGER* AND *LEAD LIKE JESUS*

Be Last is a testament to the tremendous work of humility God has done in the heart of Jeremy Kingsley. Jeremy's contagious passion for true servanthood is palpable on every page and will inspire readers to go against the flow of a self-centered and misguided culture to find greatness the only way it can truly be found—by serving. —**GARY CHAPMAN**, AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING BOOK *THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES*

*To my immediate family: my wife, Dawn, and my sons,
Jaden and Dylan.*



*To my birth family: parents, Randy and Virjean,
and brothers, Jeff and J. R.*



To my church family at Gateway.



*To the Onelife Ministries family: the board of directors, advisory team,
prayer partners, and financial givers.*



*To the family of believers worldwide who are truly pursuing
greatness through humility and service.*



And finally, to Jesus. I hope this makes you smile.

Contents

Preface: It All Started with a T-Shirt	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction: Graduating to Greatness	xv
1. How Do I Become Great? "Being Last" by Living a Life of Service	1
2. The Way of Blood "Being Last" by Living a Life of Mercy	15
3. We Got Caught—He Got Punished "Being Last" by Living a Life of Sacrifice	27
4. Love Is Last "Being Last" by Living a Life of Love	41
5. God Can Use . . . Anybody "Being Last" by Living a Life of Humility	63
6. The Rebel "Being Last" by Living a Life of Submission	77
7. Aliens "Being Last" by Living Life as an Alien	95
8. The Cover-Up "Being Last" by Living a Life of Confession	111
9. Amazing Jesus "Being Last" by Living a Life That Causes Positive Amazement	133
10. Learning to Love in the Trenches "Being Last" by Living Your Life in the Trenches	149
Conclusion	163
A Note on Understanding the Bible	167
About the Author	171

Preface

It all started with a T-shirt.

Some time ago I was speaking at a music festival in Pennsylvania when a representative from Tyndale House Publishers came to hear me speak and afterward to talk about a manuscript I had written called *One Step Closer*. As we walked the grounds, we came to my resource table, where people could purchase CDs, books, and T-shirts.

“What’s that?” my Tyndale friend asked, pointing to a shirt with the simple words **Be Last** printed boldly on the front.

I told him that being last was one of the key messages I speak on.

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

I’ve actually had that question asked of me many times, and it has always provided a great opportunity to share a truth that I believe is greatly lacking in the Christian community. “Well,” I said, “it’s about humility and service and trying to always put Jesus and other people first. Jesus said that’s how we become great—by being last.”

“Okay,” he said, to my surprise. “Let’s put *One Step Closer* on hold for now. I want you write a book on that!”

So here it is.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the faculty and staff of Columbia International University for their investment in teaching me how “To Know Him and Make Him Known.”

I would also like to thank Kingdom Building Ministries for years of continued support and encouragement to my family and ministry.

Last, but certainly not least, thanks to Paul T. Penley and Creston Mapes for their help in transcribing messages, editing, and sharing their insights on portions of this book.

Introduction: Graduating to Greatness

Remember when you graduated from high school or college? Maybe there was talk of parties with friends, neighbors, and relatives. Your dad may have pulled out that old tie that made you feel sweaty and ridiculous, and your mom was on an emotional roller coaster because her little baby was all grown up and moving on.

If you were anything like me, you almost missed graduation altogether! In high school, I not only wore the hat of class clown but also lacked motivation, as evidenced by grades of “Incomplete” in simple classes such as typing (yes, that was “B.C.”—before computers). While the rest of the senior class got out of school a week early to frolic in the sun and try out their new freedom, I was forced to spend the week making up the piles of work I’d conveniently put off by acting like a moron.

That’s not all. Once I *did* get on track, I still almost missed graduation. Sweating it out on the street basketball courts of Washington, D.C., in a series of intense afternoon games, I completely forgot about my high school graduation ceremony.

“Where have you been?” my mom screamed when she heard the screen door slam. “It’s time to leave right now!”

Skipping the shower and grabbing my best “waiter looking” outfit—including the tie Dad had dug up—I was out the door, smelling like anything but a graduation rose.

What was your graduation ceremony like? How did you feel that day? Did some students get special recognition for certain accomplishments? I think, for the most part, graduation ceremonies are pretty similar. But there's one ceremony I've heard about that continues to blow me away, and even helped plant a seed in my mind for the book you hold in your hands.

That ceremony takes place each year at a Christian college that cares a great deal about academics, athletics, relationships, and most important, the spiritual development of each student. Therefore, it's only fitting that when its graduates walk across the stage, they not only shake hands with the president and receive their diplomas but also receive something much more important, much more symbolic: a towel.

Why a towel? Because as in the Bible, one of that college's core values is humility. Putting others first. Helping people. Serving. Becoming last so that Jesus can be magnified. The towel is a reminder of one of the last and most critical things Jesus did among his followers—he knelt and washed their feet. And he told his disciples to do the same.

Jesus said that he didn't come to be served but to serve (see Mark 10:45). He was spent for us, and the towel is a vivid reminder that life is not about us or about our becoming the greatest in the world's eyes by achieving some lofty personal, academic, athletic, corporate, or financial goal. Life is about serving others. It's about connecting with God and doing what he says. Jesus taught that the way up is down. The last shall be first.

So what do you say we go on a journey together? A journey to the back of the line. A journey to be last.

—*Jeremy Kingsley*



How Do I Become Great?

“Being Last” by Living a Life of Service

What tops your list of things that you’re good at? Is it writing or cooking or dancing or accounting or music? Are you an accomplished engineer or the chairman of a board or a decorated athlete? Maybe you’re the guy who can fix any computer problem or the woman who can parallel park on any street in the city. The options for showing off what you do well are nearly endless.

But being good at something and being great at it are not the same. There is a difference between having *strong* skills and being *great* with those skills. The same is true for our Christian experience. Maybe you’re known as “pretty good,” a Christian who can teach well or sing well or lead well or memorize well or serve well. Have you ever wanted your Christian experience to become great? Maybe you’re not even very good at following Jesus right now but you still want to become great. That kind of hunger usually resides in those who have met Jesus and have seen how amazing he is.

When you think about your Christian experience, would you call it “great”? Would you say that you have achieved “greatness” or

at least are headed in that direction? The question may be a bit too hard to ponder, but the quest for greatness is a topic worth pursuing. Of course, there is no way to determine the “greatness” of one’s life with Christ until we define the word itself. And that can be a difficult task because our presumed definitions are often skewed by the surrounding culture’s values.

When it comes to business, music, or sports, greatness is easier to define. For example, the statement that Michael Jordan was a great basketball player is hardly contestable. His six championships, Olympic gold medal, MVP awards, appearances on All-Star teams, scoring records, and game-winning shots prove it. His actions and awards place him above all his competitors. Boxer Muhammad Ali, football receiver Jerry Rice, and golfer Tiger Woods have accomplished similar feats in their own sports, feats that demonstrate greatness. But how do we define greatness in the Christian life? Can checking stat sheets and lists of awards provide a clear standard for evaluating the greatness of a Christian? *How do I become great?*

Is it worth expending the energy required to experience God’s great life for us? Well, if *I’m* defining greatness, I don’t know whether it’s worth pursuing. And if *you’re* defining greatness, I’m not sure you’ll want to chase an arbitrary idea that you made up for yourself. But if the greatest One of all defines greatness for us, we would be wise to learn what he says—and the greatest One who has ever lived *has* spoken about greatness. The King of kings and Lord of lords has told us how we should approach the journey toward greatness. So just like golfers who pay thousands of dollars for instruction from Tiger or computer software engineers who listen intently to Michael Dell, we should drop everything and tune into Jesus’ approach to greatness.

God's Cheering Section

In John 12:41 the writer explains that the prophet Isaiah saw and described the glory of Jesus in Isaiah 6. So if we want to get a taste of how great Jesus was before he came to earth as a human being, we should check out what Isaiah saw in his vision of the Messiah's glory hundreds of years before Christ came. It may take a little time for us twenty-first-century Americans to understand how profoundly Isaiah's vision depicts Jesus' greatness, but stick with me, and I'll try to explain. First, let's see what Isaiah 6:1-4 says:

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

Words certainly do not do justice to what this experience would have been like for Isaiah. One moment he is praying, and the next moment he is swept into a vision of the Lord himself. He sees the inside of God's heavenly home—a temple different from the one Solomon built on Mount Zion because of the giant throne in it—and he encounters a sanctuary full of creatures bringing down the house with their alternating chants focused on Jesus.

In this vision Isaiah sees a room filled with seraphim. Now these are not the type of angels who look human or your classic

“two wingers.” These are special beings that have three pairs of wings. Each pair of wings has a specific purpose. When these beings are in the presence of Jesus, they use one pair of wings to cover their faces out of humility. With the second pair they cover their feet out of respect. They use the third pair to maintain flight. Apparently it takes specially designed body parts to give Jesus the honor he deserves when you’re in a room filled with his magnificence.

The job of the seraphim is simpler to describe than their unique physique. The seraphim have only one reason to exist: to tell God all the time how awesome he is. All they do is shout back and forth, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” and let their chants about his global glory blow up the decibel meter. They were created to be his constant cheering section, like a “divine dawg pound”! What a life! Imagine constantly getting to cheer for your favorite sports team in its home stadium and knowing that your team is the eternally undisputed world champion.

Do you understand what all this hoopla means? These heavenly beings have been created for the single purpose of chanting and cheering about Jesus’ glory. That’s all they do. Think about it. You’ve got to be indescribably great if angels have been created just to shout about you forever. Suppose you went up to one of these angels and asked, “Excuse me, Angel 3058, what is it that you do?”

Angel 3058 would reply, “I spend my time crying out how amazing Jesus is.”

If you asked him, “What do you do after work?” he’d say, “There is no ‘after.’ I just keep calling out how great Jesus is.”

If you begged him to come help you with something, he’d have to respond, “I can’t stop telling Jesus how amazing he is.

We're about to start the MVP chant, and there's just no way we can have one less voice publicizing God's fame. I've got to go!"

That gives Jesus the right to define greatness for us if he desires.

When Does Jesus Teach Us How to Become Great?

If Jesus is so great, then he knows that we need him to show *us* how to become great. A few times in his life would have seemed prime opportunities for him to do that. Maybe his birth would have been a great time? If he was going to teach us how to be great, he should probably have started off his time on earth with a grand entrance. Christmas morning should have been more like the Fourth of July, with fireworks coming out of heaven to light up the whole earth. Jesus should have flown in like a comet whose blazing light dwarfed the radiance of the sun so that every human being would have been awakened by his arrival and overwhelmed by the warmth of his presence. Then he could have ordered his seraphim posse to start up a universal chant and shake the atmosphere with their shouts of his holiness. The ensuing light, heat, and earthquake would certainly have moved all the people on the planet to cover their eyes, tremble in awe, and acknowledge that someone greater than all others had descended on their world.

He could have been born in a palace to a great king and queen. Lived in the most luxurious "crib" ever built. Had silk diapers, cashmere blankets, the purest baby food, gold teething rings—the whole nine yards. But nothing of the sort happened. Jesus took an entirely different approach.

Instead, he came out of Mary's womb to an audience of animals in a small Judean town called Bethlehem. His parents were from

Nazareth, a town in the Galilean backwoods with a reputation for producing nothing good (see John 1:46). His adoptive dad was a blue-collar worker struggling to make an honest shekel, and his mom got pregnant with him before she was married. That had to have had people talking—a pregnant girl “showing” before the wedding. That was not a great situation. To all appearances, Jesus came on the scene like just one more illegitimate child, born into a poor backwoods family, with little hope of doing anything great in his life.

Remember, there was no room for him in the inn. But suppose there had been room in the inn. What if you had been born in a crummy, roach-infested motel on the outskirts of town? Would that be embarrassing to you, or humiliating? Well, Jesus didn’t even get that. When he was born, his mother laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for farm animals. We’re talking about a place with essentially the same bacteria count as a gas station bathroom. You know, the kind where you flush the toilet with your foot because you’re afraid to touch anything with your hands.

Why would Jesus be willing to be born that way? Why would the One with angels created to tell him how great he is come to earth that way, birthed around smelly farm animals and dung droppings? Now God *did* supply angels to make a special announcement to a group of local shepherds, but otherwise the world went on essentially undisturbed. Only some rich guys from the Far East saw any other sign that the glorious One had come to earth. Few people even knew he had come. That just doesn’t seem to communicate greatness.

If Jesus’ greatness was not revealed in a big way at his birth, then maybe that revelation came during his adult life? The closest we do come to an event where Jesus reveals his glory on earth is

the Transfiguration. As Mark 9 records, Jesus took three of his disciples and went up on a mountain, where he was transformed into a figure shining with glorious light. The disciples who were with him fell down in awe and could only stumble for words. They were getting a view of Jesus' true glory and didn't know how to react. At one point Peter even asked if they could build shelters for Jesus and his two glorious companions, Moses and Elijah, to inhabit.

For the three disciples, this experience would have been a lot like Isaiah's experience. Is that what Isaiah saw? They got to see God's glory glowing around Jesus and hear the thunderous voice of the Father say, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

And we should. But seeing a bit of Jesus' glory for a few moments was different from having him teach the disciples how to be great. All of his miracles—healing the blind, bringing people back to life, walking on water, and casting out demons—showed his greatness, but then Jesus was fully God and fully human. What about giving us humans a chance to be great? Where was the recipe for greatness?

The friends Jesus made and the people he touched showed no signs of having achieved greatness through meeting the right people in places of power and influence. Jesus himself was actually known as a friend of low-life Jews who collected taxes for the oppressive Roman government. He spent time with drunks and prostitutes in his effort to call Israel back to holiness. He did not wine and dine at fancy Roman parties or get chummy with the priests who controlled the Temple and ran the Jewish law courts. His compatriots were anything but great, and he did more to make the famous and powerful leaders of Roman Palestine angry at him than he did to win their respect and honor. So

he certainly did not teach us how to be great by working his way up the ancient corporate food chain into a place of authority and prominence.

So if not at his birth and not throughout his life, maybe he would teach us greatness during his final entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover, just a few days before he died? That would have been a great time to show us. He could have slowly gathered a mass of followers who would all rise up and crown him king when he entered the city. He could have taken a patient and covert approach that waited until enough people recognized his greatness before he called on them to declare it publicly in word and deed. In this approach, the disciples could have organized music and choirs. There could have been a Jewish army of 500,000 soldiers and an angelic army of one million, with other followers dressed in fancy robes and carrying banners. All of these could have descended on the city in full battle array with a thousand chariots and great stallions leading the charge. Now that would have been great!

But no such rise to greatness occurred during the Triumphal Entry. Instead of a parade of chariots and stallions leading an army marked by banners proclaiming Jesus' kingship, Jesus came waddling down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem on a young donkey. Instead of a band with music echoing through the valley, a crowd of ordinary people came out, shouting his praise and throwing branches and clothes on the ground in front of him. Those with power and influence in Jerusalem gave him no respect, and a few Pharisees even told Jesus to make his little followers stop shouting. Although his small band of followers showed their support, Jesus did not show us how to unleash greatness and ascend to status and prestige at just the right time

in one's career. He came to a city where influential people plotted his death.

In our search to find out where Jesus teaches us how to become great, we seem to be running out of time. He didn't seem to show us how to do it when he came on the earthly scene or while growing up here, and he didn't seem to show us how to do it when he arrived at Jerusalem for his final days. Or did he? He certainly had a ministry full of great acts, but he spent most of his time with the poor and rejected elements of the Jewish population instead of working his way up to the top. But now, with only days left before his death, there's another chance. Do you remember? He broke up a conversation among his disciples about who was the greatest, and he dropped a huge bombshell: The last will be first. The humble person is the greatest. Jesus had actually been showing us the whole time, from his birth all the way to this point. But he had been saving a special final lesson for the night before his death. And now for everyone who had missed it being displayed his whole life, he would show us very plainly how to become great.

Getting Down and Dirty

In John 13 we find Jesus around a table with his disciples for the Last Supper. They have all just come in from a day of ministry in the dusty streets of Jerusalem. Their feet are dirty, and there is no servant to wash the filth from them. So Jesus picks up a towel, gets some water, and decides to be the humble servant among his disciples.

Now the other men in that room knew how inappropriate it would be for any of them to touch one another's feet, much less the One who had angels created to praise him! The job of foot

washing was saved for the lowest of the low, the servants of the servants. Only the least important, most underprivileged people—those who had been born among a bunch of farm animals or in a gas station bathroom—got stuck with that duty. In fact, rabbinic documents show that rabbis and Pharisees in the time after Christ would force their disciples to serve them in every way that slaves would serve their masters *except* for one thing: They were never, ever to touch anyone’s feet. That was simply too demeaning for any “respectable” human being to endure.

So the statement Jesus made by washing his disciples’ feet would have been profound. He had said before that greatness came from humbling oneself. He had *said*, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first” (see Matthew 19:30), but now he was *showing* it. He was getting down and dirty. Most kings get served. His greatness would not be achieved by working his way up through the political or religious ranks. He did not try to schmooze powerful people or gather an armed crowd that could rise up against the establishment and make him king. His greatness was being worked out as he went out of his way to serve those around him. In a move that ran counter to his culture, he *descended* to greatness.

Do I Know How to Serve?

When I was twenty-two, I spent a couple of years as an intern under Adrian Despres, an itinerant evangelist with Kingdom Building Ministries and the current chaplain for Steve Spurrier and the University of South Carolina Gamecocks football team. I was under the impression that the internship was designed to help me improve as a speaker. I traveled with Adrian to different

speaking events all over the world to see what he could teach me about effective communication.

To my chagrin, I found myself attending a bunch of events for my “speaking internship” but never speaking. Adrian would invite me along, tell me where to sit, and then have me listen to him. Eventually he let me start introducing him before I took my seat, but still I didn’t get a chance to speak. I constantly wondered whether I had misunderstood the point of the internship. Did Adrian not know that he was supposed to help me become a better communicator, a professional speaker, and not a better audience member? He did finally carve out a one-minute opening spot where I could share a story before sitting down, but that hardly gave me a chance to warm up before taking my seat.

As I kept tagging along to different events, I became more and more bewildered about how I could learn to improve my communication skills. Instead of speaking and getting his feedback, I got to participate in his strange “rituals” before and after his presentations on stage—offstage actions that I thought had nothing to do with speaking. Sometimes we would arrive early at a camp or a church, and he’d have me set up tables and chairs, maybe even vacuum or volunteer in the kitchen. Adrian was the kind of guy who picked up trash and put away shopping carts that other patrons had left scattered around the parking lot. I tried to remind him that “people get paid to do those jobs,” but he didn’t much care. He would say, “I know. I just want to help ‘em out!” Those “rituals” were part of his approach to life and ministry. Maybe somehow these things were linked to Adrian’s speaking ministry.

One day, about a year into my internship, Adrian asked if I

thought my internship was going okay. On the inside I was thinking, *Not really! How in the world can I get better at speaking if I don't speak? Doesn't practice make perfect or something like that?* Of course, I didn't come out and say those things. I just answered his inquiry with an affirmative and waited for an explanation. That's when he said something that I'll never forget: "Before we started this whole thing, I knew you could speak. I didn't know if you could serve."

Adrian's comments changed my life. I wanted to be a great speaker. Adrian wanted me to be great *spiritually*.

Let those words ring in your head for a while, and fill in the blank with whatever you are good at. I know you can organize; I just don't know if you can serve. I know you can set up a network in a day; I just don't know if you can serve. I know you can lead a Bible study and pray in public; I just don't know if you can serve. I know you are good at any number of things; I just don't know if you can serve.

You see, Adrian knew that humility + service = greatness. Proud people usually don't serve unless they do it out of wrong motives. Do you know how to be last? Let that question sink into your conscience. Let it measure your true greatness. And ask yourself, If someone tested you for the next year on whether or not you were a humble servant, what would that person find? Would you show yourself to be great? Would you imitate Jesus and *descend* to greatness? Or do you have trouble taking a back-seat and being last?

I Came to Serve

Jesus' ultimate act of humility is described in a poetic formula that Paul likely borrowed from a first-century hymn. The song

tells the story of Jesus in his glory making the tough choice to get down and dirty on earth as a human servant. Paul writes, “Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he 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 on a cross” (see Philippians 2:6-8). What “divine privileges” did he give up? Jesus did not give up his deity. But he did give up his rights to full glory, complete majesty, a sinless environment, and continuous praise. The Greatest gave all that up to be last.

When you think about it, Jesus gave up majesty for a mud hole. He came from a trophy room to a cold, smelly manger and a sickly world. Hollywood’s *Cribs* has nothing on the mansion and glory Jesus left behind. He gave up a throne room of perfect peace for a place of conflict, where abuse, criticism, suffering, ridicule, and indescribable pain would follow him for thirty-three years and ultimately take his life.

Paul’s words in Philippians 2:6-8 make it clear that Jesus’ painful and humble service was no accident. He didn’t come expecting to receive glory and the accolades of the world. He knew all along that true greatness lives in the form of lowly service. He knew that the path to success in God’s economy required a descent to greatness—an unusual twist in our expectations.

Our culture presumes that being first, richest, hippest, happiest, and most liked is the key to finding joy and contentment, the key to being great. The good life is marked by convenience and freebies. Even the church, in some instances, mistakes a blessed life with an easy and unchallenged life. But Jesus calls us to give up our pretensions of greatness defined by fame,

carefree living, or accomplishment. Contrary to popular opinion, greatness is defined by the humble and often hidden actions of a person who has given up on coming out on top. It's consistently putting Jesus and others first. Living a life of greatness is actually walking a difficult path of self-sacrifice and inconvenience, driven by a greater concern for others. A truly *great* person does not need to be served but is bent on serving others. Jesus said it himself: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28).

So now, let us begin the journey of being last and descending to greatness.

About the Author

Jeremy Kingsley is the founder and president of Onelife Ministries and has been an itinerant communicator since 1996. A highly respected teacher, he is one of the most sought-after speakers today. Jeremy has spoken to hundreds of thousands of people in the United States and has also been involved in ministry in Africa, Mongolia, India, and Central America. He holds degrees from Columbia International University. He and his wife, Dawn, and their sons, Jaden and Dylan, live in South Carolina.