SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany · February 8, 2026
Readings: Isaiah 58:1–9a [9b–12] · Psalm 112:1–9 [10] · 1 Corinthians 2:1–12 [13–16] · Matthew 5:13–20

Preached by Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT thomaslucking.com

Introduction: Everyone Wants to Be Great

This weekend, our culture is fixated on one of the biggest stages of greatness our world knows — **the Super Bowl.**

Millions will watch.
Cities will celebrate.
Homes will gather.
People will wear jerseys, cheer for their team, argue over stats, and hope their side comes out on top.

Because the Super Bowl is not just a game.
It's a symbol of **ultimate success.**

It represents winning.
It represents dominance.
It represents being the best on the biggest stage.

And it taps into something deeper than sports.

Everyone wants to be great.

We want to be great at our careers, great parents, great leaders, great achievers, great influencers. We measure greatness in numbers: income, followers, awards, titles, visibility, reputation. The world teaches us that greatness is something you **achieve**, something you **build**, something you **display**.

Jesus does not deny our desire for greatness.

But He radically redefines it.

“Whoever does and teaches these commandments will be called **great in the kingdom of heaven**.” (Matthew 5:19)

Not great on earth.
Not great in public opinion.
Not great in success metrics.

Great **in the kingdom of heaven**.

And that greatness looks nothing like what the world expects.

Salt of the Earth: Invisible Power

Jesus begins with an image that feels small:

“You are the salt of the earth.” (Matthew 5:13)

Salt is not flashy.
It doesn’t draw attention to itself.
It doesn’t dominate a meal.

But salt **changes everything** it touches.

Salt preserves what would rot.
Salt heals wounds.
Salt brings out flavor.
Salt transforms without being seen.

But there is a deeper truth here.

Salt also **burns** when poured into an open wound.
Salt also **corrodes** when it is misused.
Salt also **destroys** when it is applied without wisdom.

And so does religion.

Truth without love becomes cruelty.
Righteousness without mercy becomes self-righteousness.
Conviction without compassion becomes condemnation.
Obedience without humility becomes control.

This is why Jesus does not simply say, “Be salt.”
He says, “Follow Me.”

Because **Christ is the measure of the salt**.
Not our zeal.
Not our certainty.
Not our anger.
Not our opinions.

When salt is governed by love, it heals.
When salt is governed by ego, it wounds.

Uncrucified salt corrodes.
Crucified salt heals.

Kingdom greatness does not weaponize truth.
It incarnates it.

Fulfilling the Law, Not Escaping It

Then Jesus says something shocking:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17)

Many people assume Christianity is about freedom **from** obedience.
But Jesus teaches freedom **for** obedience.

Not legalism.
Not rule-keeping to earn salvation.
Not moral performance for approval.

But transformed hearts that desire what God desires.

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

The Pharisees had **external obedience**.
Jesus calls for **internal transformation**.

The law moves from tablets of stone to the heart.
From behavior management to soul formation.

Greatness in the kingdom is not doing religious things.
It is becoming a transformed person.

Isaiah 58: The Kind of Obedience God Wants

Isaiah 58 shows us the contrast clearly.

God rebukes religious people who fast, pray, worship — but ignore justice, compassion, and mercy.

They obey rituals but not relationships.
They perform religion but neglect people.

God says true obedience looks like:

- Loosing the bonds of injustice
- Freeing the oppressed
- Feeding the hungry
- Housing the homeless
- Caring for the vulnerable
- Repairing broken communities

This is not symbolic obedience.
This is embodied obedience.

Kingdom greatness shows up in how we treat the weak, the poor, the invisible, and the wounded.

Not in how spiritual we appear.

1 Corinthians 2: God's Wisdom vs Worldly Wisdom

Paul makes it even clearer:

"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power." (1 Corinthians 2:4)

And later he says:

"We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." (1 Corinthians 2:12)

This is crucial.

The **crucified Christ cannot be understood by worldly wisdom**.
Self-regarding wisdom cannot comprehend self-giving love.
Power logic cannot understand cruciform power.

The world reads the cross as failure.
The kingdom reads the cross as victory.

The world sees weakness.
God reveals salvation.

The world sees loss.
God reveals love.

Paul is saying: you cannot think your way into the kingdom.
You cannot achieve your way into the kingdom.
You cannot strategize your way into the kingdom.

Because the kingdom moves in the **opposite direction** from the world.

The Spirit does not lead us upward into dominance.
The Spirit leads us downward into surrender.

The Spirit does not form self-regarding people.
The Spirit forms self-giving people.

Worldly greatness depends on:

- Intelligence
- Influence
- Power
- Strategy
- Persuasion
- Image

Kingdom greatness depends on:

- The Spirit
- Humility
- Obedience
- Faithfulness
- Love
- Surrender

The world celebrates dominance.
God reveals cruciform love.

Bridge: From the Cross to Kingdom Greatness

This is why Jesus can say:

"Whoever practices and teaches these commandments will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19)

Because **kingdom obedience only makes sense through the cross.**

Apart from the crucified Christ, obedience looks like oppression.
Humility looks like weakness.
Service looks like foolishness.
Self-denial looks like loss.

But through the Spirit — not the spirit of the world — we see differently.

We see that obedience is freedom.
We see that humility is power.
We see that service is greatness.
We see that surrender is life.

The cross doesn't just save us — it **reprograms how we define greatness.**

So when Jesus speaks of greatness in the kingdom, He is not giving a moral ladder to climb. He is revealing a **new direction to walk.**

Not upward into status.
But downward into love.

Not inward into self-regard.
But outward into self-giving.

Not toward power.
But toward the cross.

What Does It Mean to Be Great in the Kingdom?

Jesus defines greatness differently:

Worldly Greatness:

- Be noticed
- Be admired
- Be powerful

• Be successful
• Be above others
• Be served

Kingdom Greatness:

• Be faithful
• Be obedient
• Be humble
• Be compassionate
• Be trustworthy
• Be formed into Christlikeness
• Be salt and light

Jesus says:

"Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Not whoever is famous.
Not whoever is impressive.
Not whoever is influential.

Whoever is faithful.

The Paradox of Kingdom Greatness

Here is the paradox:

To be great in the kingdom, you must stop trying to be great.

You must become small enough for God to work through you.

Salt only works when it dissolves.
Light only works when it burns itself away.

Greatness in God's kingdom is cruciform.
Cross-shaped.
Self-giving.
Sacrificial.

Jesus Himself models it:

The greatest in the kingdom became the servant of all.
The King washed feet.
The Lord of glory died on a cross.

Conclusion: The Table of Kingdom Greatness

Everyone wants to be great.

The question is not **whether** we will seek greatness.
The question is **which kingdom's greatness** we will pursue.

One greatness builds ego.
The other builds eternity.

One greatness lifts the self.
The other reveals Christ.

And God does not leave us to define greatness on our own.

He gives it to us in visible form.

At a table.

With bread that is broken.
And wine that is poured.

Here is greatness:

Not a throne — but a table.
Not a crown — but a cross.
Not domination — but self-giving.
Not self-exaltation — but sacrifice.

Here, the King becomes food.
Here, the Lord becomes servant.
Here, glory is hidden in humility.
Here, power is hidden in weakness.

This is the wisdom the world cannot understand.
This is the greatness the world cannot see.

And yet this is the greatness that saves the world.

So Jesus invites us:

Be salt.
Be light.
Be obedient.
Be faithful.
Be transformed.

Not to impress the world.

But to be conformed to Christ.

Not to be great in the eyes of the world.

But to be called **great in the kingdom of heaven.**

Closing: A Super Bowl Perspective

As we close, I want to bring us back to the image we began with — the **Super Bowl**, the biggest stage in American sports this weekend. The *New England Patriots* and *Seattle Seahawks* will meet on Sunday, February 8, 2026, in **Super Bowl LX** at **Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California.** The kickoff will be in the evening, and you've probably already heard about the halftime show, the commercials, and all the festivities that surround it.

It's a game millions will watch — some with snacks, some with friends, some with team colors, some with perfection in their predictions. And it's okay to enjoy that.

It is not a sin to watch football.
It is not inherently unspiritual to enjoy a game, to laugh with friends, to appreciate athletic skill, to cheer for your hometown team, to enjoy halftime performances, or even to discuss plays the next day.

Super Bowl worship, however, is a different thing.
When *winning* becomes more important than *worshipping Christ*;
when *victory* becomes more important than *virtue*;
when *status* becomes more important than *service*;
when *a game* becomes more important than *the Great Commandment* — then we have turned something good into something idolatrous.

Paul reminds us that believers have not received "the spirit of the world" but the Spirit from God so that we may understand what God has freely given us.
The world celebrates **dominance and victory**.
The kingdom celebrates **cross-shaped love, humble obedience, and self-giving service**.

So if you watch the game this weekend — *watch with joy, not obsession.*
Enjoy the fellowship, the food, the excitement — but **keep your heart anchored in Christ**.

Here's a simple way to put it in perspective as Christians:

- **Watch the game** — if it's fun and brings you together with others.
- **Don't let it define you** — your identity is in Christ, not in wins or losses.
- **Don't let it distract you** — worship and family come first.
- **Pray for the players** — that they would play with integrity and gratitude.
- **Use it as a chance to bless others** — invite people, share hospitality, build relationships.

Because here is the gospel truth:
The world calls the winner great.
Jesus calls the obedient great.
Those are not the same thing.

And so we live as a people who can enjoy the gifts of this world, yet **keep our eyes fixed on the Kingdom that lasts forever**.

Amen.

Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT is a psychotherapist and coach who preaches at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in the Santa Cruz area. More sermons and information about Christian counseling: **thomaslucking.com/sermons**

© 2026 Dr. Thomas Lucking. You are welcome to share this sermon for non-commercial use with attribution.