

A sermon by The Rev. Brian Vander Wel
on Matthew 18:15-20 and Romans 12:9-21
given September 4, 2005.

Arguably, Alexander III of Macedonia (who lived from 356-323 B. C.) – also known as Alexander the Great – was the greatest military general and world leader of all time. His accomplishments are just too many to count. He was the son of the king of Macedonia, Philip II and his wife Olympia, tutored in military strategy by the greatest generals of the day, educated by the great philosopher Aristotle, cavalry commander at age eighteen, king of Macedonia at twenty. And at age 26, he was leader of the Greeks, conqueror of the Persian Empire, Overlord of Asia Minor and Pharaoh of Egypt. “Over the next [seven] years [of his life], in his capacity as king, commander, politician, scholar and explorer, Alexander led his army 11,000 miles [into India,] found[ed] over 70 cities and creat[ed] an empire that stretched across three continents and covered some two million square miles.” And he died when he was only 33.

Throughout history, even to the present day, great rulers measure their lives and achievements against the great Alexander, including: Julius Caesar, Nero, Cleopatra, Charlemagne, Louis XIV and Napoleon just to name a few.¹ Yes, learning a little of Alexander the Great usually leaves one asking the question: So, what have you done with your life?

Allow me, though, to compare Alexander’s life to that of Jesus. You may notice a stark contrast. Except as a young child in Egypt, Jesus traveled no more than 30 miles from his home town his entire life. He was royalty but of an ancient bloodline in a weak, currently occupied kingdom. He had a ragtag bunch of nobodies who – despite being his followers – misunderstood him, argued with him, doubted him, betrayed him and deserted him. And in the end Jesus was publicly executed in the chaos of a hasty, false trial and mob scene. So, what did Jesus do with his life? Sure, he healed some people, said some interesting things, walked on water, fed a huge crowd with meager resources. But so what? What did he DO with his life? What could he have

¹ Sources: “Alexander III of Macedon (356-323 BC)” by Dr. Joann Flecker found at http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/alexander_the_great.shtml and “Alexander the Great” by Eugene N. Borza found at http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/mil/html/mh_001400_alexanderthe.htm.

possibly accomplished, dying such a humiliating death at roughly the same age Alexander died: 33. From a human point of view and next to Alexander the Great, Jesus' life appears to fizzle and sputter out before it truly matured to greatness.

But, thank God (thank God!) crucifixion is not the final word of Jesus' life. Easter Day - when Jesus walked out of the tomb - is when Jesus' life really is seen for what it is. On that morning in a lonely garden outside the city, the world, indeed the whole universe, is stood on its head. Jesus' death and resurrection were not a fluke. They were the centerpiece of God's plan. He died not because he was misunderstood and upset the leaders of the day. He died because the Father willed it. He died because he was obedient.

In his greatest act, the act of obeying the Father, Jesus triumphs. In his greatest action, his death on the cross, Jesus is vindicated by God by raising him from the dead. And to the point, by being raised from the God, God has appointed Jesus to rule the world forever. Despite all the striving of all people at all times, Jesus through obedience reigns. So, Jesus is Lord. Not Alexander the Great. Jesus is Lord. Not Julius Caesar. Jesus is Lord, not Cleopatra, not Napoleon, not Thomas Jefferson, not Robert E. Lee, not John Casteen, not George Bush and not you and not me. Jesus alone is Lord of all creation, of a new world order. Master of the universe.²

Now, this is where the rubber hits the road for you and me. (If it hasn't already.) We - who are called by Christ's name - we are witnesses to this truth and are called to live the pattern of life that demonstrates his lordship. I'm going to say this again: we are witnesses to this truth and are called to live the pattern of life that demonstrates his lordship. That's where our readings from Matthew and Romans come in. Each of them places before us a piece or two of the puzzle of what our lives are meant to look like under Jesus' authority. They are patterns of life that Jesus' teaches us to live, and he empowers us to live today. When we strive to live them, we demonstrate our discipleship and his lordship.

These readings are not hard to understand. They fall into the category of Bible passages Mark Twain spoke of. He said, "I'm not troubled by the

² See especially Matthew 28:18-20 and Revelation 1:18.

passages I don't understand. I'm troubled by the ones I do." I don't have to explain to you what Paul means when he says, "Let love be genuine." You know what genuine love looks like. You also know that much of the so-called "love" you and I offer is false. I hope this troubles you as it does me.

Nevertheless, both Paul and Matthew point us to a Christian life that they clearly believe is possible. And they know that the reason it is possible is precisely because Jesus Christ is reigning from heaven and is making it possible. They tell us that we can be reconciled to someone who has sinned against us because Jesus is on the throne. We can love genuinely because we are genuinely loved by Jesus who is on the throne. We can be patient in suffering. We can extend hospitality to strangers. We can love our enemies and not avenge ourselves when wronged. We can because Jesus is on the throne.

I want to highlight one thing in particular that we are called to do: rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. You may see, as I do, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina a particular need for the last one, weeping with those who weep. The story is told of a four year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When he came back, his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor. The little boy replied, "Nothing, I just helped him cry." Now more than ever we are called to help the world cry.

I want to say two things in closing. First, we come under the authority of Christ's rule by renouncing the powers of this world. At our baptism, we demonstrate this action: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. I renounce them. Do you renounce all the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. I renounce them. Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God. I renounce them." You must renounce the world, the flesh and the devil. You must renounce them before you can affirm your commitment to Christ. That's how our baptism begins. That's how it's possible. The Scriptures are very clear: you cannot be a friend of God and a friend of the world. You either are God's friend and the world's enemy or God's enemy and the world's friend. They are mutually exclusive. To renounce one is to embrace the other.

The second thing in closing is this: Jesus alone makes living in the kingdom possible. Without his life of obedience, without his resurrection, without reconciliation to God and forgiveness of our sins offered to us by means of the blood of Christ's cross, you are I are without hope. Jesus is the beginning of faith. But he is also the middle and end of our faith. You do not have the will, the power, the inclination or the strength to do anything that our Scripture readings call us to do. It is only through persistent and consistent dependence on Christ and his forgiveness for our inevitable failures that we can do this. But let's not lose this point: WE CAN LIVE THIS LIFE! We can live the life Jesus calls us to live because we can do all things through him who gives us strength.³ We can because Jesus is Lord.

It is said of Alexander the Great that at the end of all his conquests, "when [he] saw there was nothing left to conquer, he supposedly wept."⁴ Learning this leaves one rather cold and asking a haunting question, "So, was Alexander's victories nothing more than vain ambition, conquest for its own sake?" It seems rather pathetic that one of the greatest rulers of the world would seem so frail, so easily captive to such an ordinary vice: vain ambition.

What do you live for? Do you want to live you life satisfying your own ambitions? Do you seek great accomplishments according to the worlds standards? Or do you, like Jesus seek to live a life of simple obedience? Obedience to the Father's will seeking to demonstrate Jesus' lordship? In other words, do you seek greatness as God himself defines greatness: "[W]hoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."⁵ Friends, let us seek to be great by living the life described in our readings today.

³ Philippians 4:13.

⁴ "Bill Clinton's Plan for World Domination" by Jennifer Senior in "New York" magazine, page 82 August 22, 2005.

⁵ Matthew 20:26-28.

Discarded text:

And now that Jesus has been vindicated, God has given him the authority to usher in a whole new world. The old one is passing away, the new one has broken in and is approaching like a hurricane. But not a hurricane of destruction. A hurricane which renews and redeems. A hurricane that makes all wrongs to right. Put on your crash helmets, here it comes. Jesus is the one who holds all the cards. He even holds the keys to death itself.

So Jesus, now, is really the greatest success story in the history of the world. He alone defines what greatness is, and he as the ruler of the world, as the master of the universe, is the one to whom all knees shall bow – including Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Thomas Jefferson, Robert E. Lee, George W. Bush, John Casteen, you and me. “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.”⁶ Amen?

Mother Theresa once said that when you give something to God, even if it is small, it becomes of infinite value in his hands. Part of the life of faith means living your life by the standards and ways of the kingdom of knowing, understanding that your life may not be great in the world’s eyes, understanding that you probably be misunderstood, understanding that you may suffer. But faith says, “I trust the one who made me. I will live my life for him and allow him to measure my successes and failures.”

I think that if you wrote down on a piece of paper everything that everyone who comes to this building today will ever do in their life time and put on another piece of paper the things Alexander the Great accomplished before he died, Alexander would have more.

The question that we face in Alexander’s own disappoint, then, is not so much a question of accomplishments. Arguably, no one accomplished more than Alexander. No, the question we are faced with is the question of what are you living for? Or rather, whom are you living for? Are you living to satisfy your own vain ambitions? Are you striving for accomplishments that in the end will not satisfy? Or are you living your life for God? Do you live for a greatness that the world strives for, a greatness that in the end is hollow and disappointing? Do we aspire to true greatness? Greatness as God defines Greatness?

⁶ Revelation 11:15.

Source Articles:

Alexander the Great (source:

http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/mil/html/mh_001400_alexanderthe.htm)

Cavalry commander at age eighteen, king at twenty, conqueror of the Persian Empire at twenty-six, explorer of the Indian frontier at thirty, Alexander the Great died before his thirty-third birthday: neither the ancient sources nor the modern literature take sufficient note of this brilliant commander's extreme youth. What permanent accomplishments resulted from this whirlwind of activity?

Alexander's defeat of the Persian Empire removed the bloc that had prevented the spread of Greek settlements into the East. Although no surviving evidence suggests that Alexander himself promoted a policy of Hellenization, Greek culture undoubtedly penetrated into western Asia as the result of his conquests, and western Asia, up to the Mesopotamian frontier, became for the first time a part of the Greek world. This is Alexander's most certain, though unintended, historical achievement.

Alexander's military genius is undisputed. He improved the fine army inherited from his father, Philip, by the addition of allied forces; he strengthened the cavalry arm, utilized weapons specialists, and employed a corps of engineers; he was invincible in both siege warfare and set battles. His movements were marked by speed; his logistical, intelligence, and communications operations were flawless; and his ability to improvise was unrivaled. Yet he was careful in strategy: rather than strike deep into Asia immediately, he spent nearly two years securing the coastal areas of Asia Minor and the Levant in order to ensure that Persian naval forces would not interdict his lines to Europe. Bit by bit he wore away the western sections of the Persian Empire before driving into Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau.

Only three setbacks checked his progress. Along the Indian frontier his officers refused to march farther east, and, after his return to Babylonia, his Macedonian troops mutinied against the integration of Asian troops into the ranks. The third episode was the horrible loss of personnel in the Makran desert on the return march from India to the Persian Gulf, where lack of water and food accomplished what no enemy army had been able to do.

Alexander's conquests created a legend that would provide the standard by which other leaders measured their careers. **Kings, generals, and emperors discovered that they were unable to compete with the legend and turned to emulation—Antiochus the Great, Pompey the Great, Nero, Caracalla, Severus Alexander, and Charlemagne, to mention a few—and Alexander's career as a metaphor for achievement has reached even into modern times.**

But the ruler who is arguably the most famous secular figure in history was little admired in his own lifetime. Although we lack sufficient details about his character, there was no doubt that he was an inspiring leader and personally a very brave

soldier. He was ruthless toward those who opposed him—even from within his own ranks—but fair and honest toward those who exhibited courage and skill. He probably suffered from an overwhelming ambition and an uncontrollable temper that often arose from drinking excessive amounts of wine. He was widely despised by many of the subject Greeks, whose attitude might best be summed up by the comment attributed to one Athenian orator who, when informed of Alexander's death, replied, "What? Alexander dead? Impossible! The world would reek of his corpse!" In the end, his achievement appears to have been a grand adventure tied to his own personal ambitions—**conquest for its own sake.**

By Eugene N. Borza

Alexander III of Macedon (356-323 BC) (source:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/alexander_the_great.shtml)

Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great, single-handedly changed the entire nature of the ancient world in little more than ten years.

Born in the northern Greek kingdom of Macedonia in 356 BC, to Philip II and his formidable wife Olympias, **Alexander was educated by the philosopher Aristotle.** Following his father's assassination in 336 BC, he inherited a powerful yet volatile kingdom, which he had to secure - along with the rest of the Greek city states - before he could set out to conquer the massive Persian Empire, in revenge for Persia's earlier attempts to conquer Greece.

Against overwhelming odds, he led his army to victories across the Persian territories of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt without incurring a single defeat. With his greatest victory at the Battle of Gaugamela, in what is now northern Iraq, in 331 BC, **the young king of Macedonia, leader of the Greeks, Overlord of Asia Minor and Pharaoh of Egypt also became Great King of Persia at the age of 25.**

Over the next eight years, in his capacity as king, commander, politician, scholar and explorer, Alexander led his army a further 11,000 miles, founding over 70 cities and creating an empire that stretched across three continents and covered some two million square miles.

The entire area from Greece in the west, north to the Danube, south into Egypt and as far east as the Indian Punjab, was linked together in a vast international network of trade and commerce. This was united by a common Greek language and culture, whilst the king himself adopted foreign customs in order to rule his millions of ethnically diverse subjects.

Primarily a soldier, Alexander was an acknowledged military genius who always led by example, although his belief in his own indestructibility meant he was often reckless with his own life and that of those he expected to follow him. The fact that his army only refused to do so once, in the 13 years of a reign during which there was constant fighting, indicates the loyalty he inspired.

Following his death in 323 BC at the age of only 32, his empire was torn apart in the power struggles of his successors. **Yet Alexander's mythical status rapidly reached epic proportions and inspired individuals as diverse as Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Louis XIV and Napoleon.**

He continues to be portrayed according to the bias of those interpreting his achievements. He is either Alexander the Great or Iskander the Accursed, chivalrous knight or bloody monster, benign multi-culturalist or racist imperialist - but above all he is fully deserving of his description as 'the most significant secular individual in history'.

By Dr Joann Fletcher