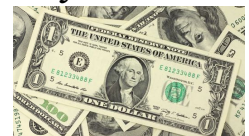


This morning we draw to a close the series we've been in looking at some people whose faith in Jesus led them to some pretty amazing and courageous lives. There's a "greatness" about them that shines through, but it's not really about them. It's about what God is doing in and through them. Most of the folks we've looked at thus far really were pretty outspoken about their faith, and really sought to point people to Jesus and were really engaged in ministry that was explicitly Christian. George Washington is a little different. His faith was a little more in the background...he wasn't leading Bible studies and worship services in a prison camp or at a shelter for the homeless or distributing Bibles in prison or traveling the world sharing about the forgiveness of God, as some of the others were. His faith was lived out in a different kind of way that's more similar to where most of us are.

And so in some ways, he might be one in this series (Jackie Robinson is the other) that is somehow easier for us to relate to. Though that's kind of ironic because of all these people, George Washington is probably the one who's the most caricatured and become almost larger than life: A state is named after him (apparently only one state is good enough to be named after any president!), and our nation's capitol is named after him, His birthday is a national holiday, his face is on the **\$1 bill**, and as the fictitious story goes: he confessed to his father at age 6 that yes, he had chopped down the cherry tree – he couldn't tell a lie. Was this guy for real? He seems super-human. **And yet the way he lived his faith is maybe the most accessible to us of all the people we've looked at in this series.** For one thing, he was a man of contradictions just like you and me: He's known as the father of our nation, but he never had children of his own, and he lost his father at a young age; He's viewed as deeply honorable, but he told some real whopper lies as a young man; The freedom of our country is owed to his hard work and leadership more than any other person of that era, and yet he had 300 slaves at his family home and farm, Mount Vernon, until shortly before his death. **Maybe all of that helps us to realize, however, that even though he's become a larger than life figure, we don't have to be perfect to be used by God in some pretty profound ways.** So, let's dive



in.

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, to Mary and Augustine Washington. He had five siblings, plus three older half-siblings from his dad's first marriage. His dad was a tobacco farmer, and he died when George he was 11.

At age 21, with no military experience, he was appointed by the Governor of the colony of Virginia to be the commander of the southernmost military district of Virginia. This gave him the rank of Major, and before his first battle leading troops, he'd been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. In his first battle in 1754, against the French military, and with the colonel absent and George in charge: he made some poor decisions and after a short time, he surrendered to the French. To save face with the governor of Virginia, he significantly shaded the truth in his reporting of what happened, shifting blame and responsibility off himself to others. He got a chance to redeem himself a short time later when he was asked to be a part of a military expedition. On July 9, 1755, a battle ensued. Of 1400 men, 976 either died or were injured, including the leader, General Braddock. Washington was the only one of Braddock's aides who escaped the battle unscathed. And it wasn't because Washington was hiding out at the back of the lines or behind the trees. **He had two horses shot out from under him and multiple bullet holes in his hat and his coat. He stood his ground and fought with great valor.** There was a significant degree of redemption of his name and reputation through this.

As a result, he was asked by Virginia's governor to lead Virginia's army, as colonel. He never led any significant battles as colonel, and he retired from the military a couple years later, at age 26. He returned to Mount Vernon, married Martha Dandridge Custis, whom he'd been courting for some time, and went to managing and working the tobacco fields, determined to make a living like his father. Before long, he ran for a seat in the House of Burgess – which was the governing body for the colony of Virginia – and he won. He served there for 16 years, but didn't really get involved that much – he rarely made a speech or engaged in debate. He certainly did not seem like a first president in the making.

Then, starting in 1764, the British established a number of different taxes over the next several years – the Revenue Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend acts. You probably remember reading about this stuff in U.S. History classes. This led to the cries for “no taxation without representation,” as the colonies were not represented in the British Parliament. The Tea Act was the straw that broke the camel’s back, which led to the Boston Tea Party in 1773. George Washington, along with 6 others from Virginia, represented their colony at the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia, in August of 1774. They decided on a boycott of all British goods, with plans to activate each colony’s military if needed.

A few months later, on April 18th, 1775, Boston silversmith Paul Revere rode through the night to warn of the imminent arrival of the British troops. The next morning was the dawn of the War of Independence. Two months into it, it was evident that the colonies needed a united military, and someone to lead it. At the age of 43, George Washington became that leader. What were the traits that the second continental congress saw in him to appoint him to this important position? **John Adams said that Washington met every qualification: he was tall, handsome, and moved gracefully.** (I guess I wouldn’t qualify!) More seriously, he had a sterling reputation: He was steady, calm, and a man of integrity...though his earlier military career showed he certainly was not perfect.

And quite frankly, maybe he was the only man foolishness enough to take this role. He’d be leading a battle against the British army – well-trained, well-funded, and well-led...one of the best militaries to ever walk the face of the earth at the time. His own army would be a bunch of guys who had mostly been working in their fields or other places of employment until being asked to fight for America’s freedom. The odds of victory were not good. In a letter to his brother-in-law he wrote, **“I can answer but for three things: a firm belief in the justice of our cause; close attention in the prosecution [carrying out] of it; and the strictest integrity. If these cannot supply the places of ability and experience, the cause will suffer”** (Eric Metaxas, *7 Men...* p. 14).

As we know, against all odds, they defeated the British. And Washington was seen as a key reason, if not *the* key reason, why. In the wake of victory, many people thought he should be crowned as king of the newly freed colonies. Others thought that even if it wasn't maybe the right thing to do, they believed that perhaps he had earned it. Others thought that Washington would capitalize on his popularity and power and simply take the title, regardless. But he didn't do that. He believed that that much power should not reside in one person, and that this newly forming country was more about the power of the people than the power of one person. Eric Metaxas writes, "Washington 'demonstrated that he was as immune to the seductions of dictatorial power as he was to smallpox,' (p. 24) which he had overcome when he was in his teens.

Eric Metaxas also writes, "Most of us can hardly fathom just how unusual Washington's decision was. In rejecting power, General Washington became the first famous military leader in the history of the world to win a war and then voluntarily step down instead of seizing and consolidating power. In fact, Washington's sworn enemy, George the III of England, could scarcely believe his ears when he heard what Washington had decided to do. If the leader of the army that had defeated the most powerful military force on earth had indeed stepped down, as was being reported, Gorge III declared that man would be 'the greatest man in the world'" (Metaxas, *7 Men...p. 24*).

Of course, this all took place before he was actually president. Most of us remember him primarily as the first president of the United States. But he could have been King George I of the United States. Instead, he was our first president, and essentially invented the U.S. Presidency. He invented how a president should lead, act, behave, dress...even what he should be called. For instance, John Adams seriously suggested that he should be addressed as "His Elective Majesty" or "His Mightiness." ☺ But Washington would have none of it. And that decision by him to forego power and self-interest has set the course of history for our country, and for much of the world. That was the first of two decisions he made to selflessly forego the opportunity for great power and authority. So at age 56, in 1788, rather than being crowned as king, he was elected as our first president. Four years later he was elected a

second time.

His second act of foregoing power and promotion of himself was another presidential precedent that he set: that he would not serve more than two four-year terms. He refused to serve any longer. He nearly left office at the end of his 1st term, but was convinced to serve again. But he would not serve beyond two terms, believing that it gave too much power to that one person. The 22nd Amendment made it law that no president could serve more than two terms, but that was not established until nearly 160 years later, in 1947. During that 160 years, like Washington, no president served more than two terms except Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was elected to four terms.

When he finished his second term, he was 65, and he returned to Mount Vernon and the farming life. On December 12th, 1799 he fell ill with what today we'd probably diagnose as a bacterial infection. Antibiotics were still more than 100 years away from being discovered, and the medical attention he received as his health deteriorated would absolutely appall us today. As a result, he died two days later on December 14th, at the age of 67.

And I think **George Washington is a fantastic illustration for us of a person who realized that whatever power he had, it was not meant for his own good, but for the benefit of others.** That too much power in his own hands would be too much of a temptation to use in the wrong kinds of ways – for selfish reasons, rather than for the betterment of the fledgling nation. I don't know how much of this realization was as a direct result of his faith; but he had a strong, if fairly private, Christian faith. Many of the "Founding Fathers" were more "deist." They believed that God created things, then stepped back and let things go on their own, like a top that's set to spinning and then just keeps going. Washington seems to have had more of a Christian faith as most of us would tend to define it. He served in his church, he had daily devotions, he was quite philanthropic in the community – though it was almost all done anonymously and privately. He didn't want the spotlight to be on him. George Washington would affirm the phrase, "There's no "I" in team."

As historian Joseph Ellis describes it, **"...he realized that all ambitions**

were inherently insatiable and unconquerable. He knew himself well enough to resist the illusion that he transcended human nature. Unlike Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell before him, and Napoleon, Lenin, and Mao after him, he understood that the greater glory resided in posterity’s judgment. If you aspire to live forever in the memory of future generations, you must demonstrate the ultimate self-confidence to leave the final judgment to them. And he did” (Joseph Ellis, quoted by Eric Metaxas in *7 Men...p. 24-25*).

Jesus kept that bigger picture in mind, too. He was tempted by the devil when he was led into the desert by the Spirit. Three times in those temptations, he was presented with opportunities to use his power to serve himself. And all three times, Jesus said, “No,” quoting Scripture, and relying on his Heavenly Father to sustain him. Power for his benefit was not going to be where he got his sustenance. Power was not what was going to be used for his own personal cause or agenda. His power came to him through the Spirit from his Heavenly Father, and Jesus always pointed people back to that source. It was never about himself – it was always about his Heavenly Father, who was the source of his power, who was the one who sustained him and nourished him and gave him his direction in life.

A little later in the New Testament, Paul makes this astounding statement in Philippians 2:5-7, when he writes to some of the early Christians in the church in the city of Philippi, **“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:**

**Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.”**

(Kenoo – “emptied himself”) Jesus humbled himself and stayed focused on what was important; stayed focused on the mission that he had. And that mission was not about himself, or his power, or his exaltation. It was about serving humanity for our benefit. His journey to earth was not a power trip

for him. It was just the opposite. It was all about others. It's about people like you and me. And because of that, a whole new course is charted for those who follow him, and the Church worldwide continues the mission that he set out on.

That doesn't mean we get to be exalted and lifted up and live in our own glory, however. We're called to be Christ-like. Jesus says so himself all over the place, and Paul says it right here at the start of this passage: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." We're called to Christ-likeness, which is to be called to humility and service letting the power of God be for God's glory and the benefit of others, not for ourselves.

That's not to say we don't have power on our own. The power that we have, such as the influence of others, whether that's over a small few people at home or in the office or somewhere else, or whether it's a large number of folks as president...the power that we have is not for ourselves, first and foremost. **God has given you that power, and the talents and abilities you have through which that power is carried out, he's given you that for the benefit of others, and for his glory.** That is evident in the life of Jesus, who emptied himself and took the position of a servant, for our sake, for the benefit of the Church, and for the glory of His Heavenly Father. He was completely focused on the mission at hand, and sacrificed any personal agenda, any desire for personal benefit. It was all for our benefit and for the glory of our Heavenly Father.

If that model for ourselves seems a little intimidating and seems awfully lofty – and let's face it, it is a lofty bar that Jesus has set – if that's intimidating because of who Jesus is, because he's God's son, because he's divinity made flesh...then let George Washington, or any of these other folks we've looked at, be an inspiration for you to live with greatness. **The secret to their greatness is no great secret at all: It comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and living as he did, completely trusting in Him for this life and the life to come.** And so they show us that ordinary people like you...like me...we can do great things for the cause of Christ and His Kingdom. You don't have to be God in the flesh to live a life that impacts others. You don't even have

to be a famous baseball player, or poet, nun, lawyer, holocaust survivor, or ground-breaking president. Just be yourself, and let God work through you. You and I can do great things and impact people's lives just as we are, and right where we are: in our families, neighborhoods, schools, and places of work...as God's power works through us for His cause and for his glory. Let's Pray...Amen.