

Greatness

By Jamie Buckingham

As an entering graduate student at Ft. Worth's Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1954, I had virtually no concept of what the term "greatness" meant.

I knew there were "great" preachers. These were, I was told, the magnificent orators, the well-known evangelists and the pastors of large churches.

I knew there were "great" singers. They were, back then, the soloists who had cut records or had been asked by Billy Graham to sing at one of his crusades.

But greatness?

As a freshman theologian, with a great disdain for anything religious, I suspected "greatness" was in no way related to "great"—as in great preacher—just as I suspected quality had little to do with quantity.

I had never been in the presence of greatness, but I imagined that if that ever happened I would recognize it by feel rather than statistic. I also suspected it was rare. Very rare.

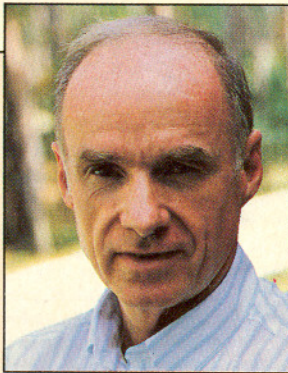
My first experience with it came while sitting in the third row of Ethics 203. The class was taught by T.B. Maston, chairman of the Christian ethics department.

Ethics, the catalog said, was the study of moral principles and values. It involved the principles of conduct governing an individual or group.

I was interested, but not excited. A cynic, I had never known anyone who seemed to be able—or who really wanted—to live up to the standard they set for others.

Sitting in that class, however, I began to feel there was something about this rather frail, gray-haired professor which rang true.

I had signed up because I wanted to sit under someone who was doing something, rather than just talking about it. Maston was a pioneer in the field of race relations among a people, and in a region, where the burning cross was often seen as synonymous with true doctrine. A quiet scholar, he was also a bold reformer, using his pen as a sword to slay



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the dragons of racial inequality, religious bigotry and injustice against the poor. But what I felt about this man went much deeper than what I knew. He was different.

It was a year before I discovered his wellspring. Others on campus who already knew had seemed too threatened to talk about it. The man who hears a higher call and walks it out among people of lower values is always a threat. But one day I stopped by his house to check an assignment. In the front room I met his then 28-year-old son, who was totally disabled. The Mastons, because of values, had chosen to raise him rather than put him in an institution.

Ex ungue leonem, the Latins said: "From the claw we may judge the lion." From the part we discover the whole.

Most of the people I knew preached ethics to others. The fact that this great scholar and reformer lived it quietly with his handicapped son awed me.

Across the years my appreciation grew stronger. Even after I was no longer a Southern Baptist I applauded him from afar as he led the fight in race relations. He was constantly on the point, hated by some, admired by others. Year after year he raised the banner of biblical scholarship against legalized gambling, pornography, loose morality and beverage alcohol. He warned us not to repeat the horrible lessons of history in the areas of church and state and religious bigotry. Ethics!

Late last year T.B. Maston's son, Thomas McDonald Maston, 61, died of cancer.

Tom Mc, as he was called by the few who dared know him, had been born with cerebral palsy. He had never spoken a word. He needed assistance with every bodily function.

Every day for 61 years Maston and his wife, Essie, dressed him, fed him, cleaned him, put him to bed and got him out of bed. Tom Mc never brushed his teeth, never tied his shoes, never combed his hair, never raised the lid of a toilet seat. He could not talk. His only means of communication were two simple symbols meaning "yes" and "no."

Yet to the Mastons, Tom Mc was a person of inestimable worth. Ethics!

Early in life the Mastons made a decision they would not "put him away." He was their son, a gift from God, a gift not to be denied.

Essie Maston, a brilliant woman who had the ability to succeed in almost any profession she chose, devoted her entire life to caring for her invalid manchild. She deliberately gave up a teaching career rather than hire another to take on the care and parental responsibilities God had given her.

It is impossible for me to comprehend spending my life serving an adult child who had to be fed every bite of food for 61 years. I'm too busy bringing in the kingdom, straightening out other people's lives, making certain every one believes as I do. Values!

Could I value my invalid manchild as more important than me? A child whose only contribution was to look out at me daily through the glazed windows of his eyes asking, "Why? Why me, Dad?"

Yet T.B. Maston, believing ethics had to be lived before it could be taught, said nothing was more important than helping his son live out the role God had given him to play. Ethics!

I still can't pinpoint with words what greatness is. But I do know that when I think of it, I think of T.B. and Essie Maston—and their 61 years of living love. ■