

THE GREATNESS DEBATE

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New Millennium Lakeshore Church

Little Rock, Arkansas

September 23, 2018 (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Mark 9:30-37

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for* those who make peace.

4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet* something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. **7** Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

*O God, our teacher and guide,
you draw us to yourself
and welcome us a beloved children.
Help us to lay aside our envy and selfish ambition,
that we may walk in your ways of wisdom and understanding
as servant of your peace. Amen.*

The passages for this sermon force us to face a painful truth: the religion of Jesus is not a call to self-promotion over others.

In the excerpt from Mark 9 we see that the closest followers of Jesus were bickering among themselves while they walked with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the climax of his ministry. They were clamoring about who would be chief pecker in their pecking order. Meanwhile, they weren't talking with Jesus about the coming crisis in his ministry and their relationship to him. Jesus used their bickering about pecking order to drive home the point that greatness with God is never achieved by self-importance, self-promotion, and competing

with others for prominence. Greatness with God is always achieved through service.

The passages from James 3 and 4 push this point farther along. The excerpt from James 3 teaches that service must be done with humility and gentleness. Eugene Peterson has paraphrased the excerpt from James 3:13-18 as follows:

Do you want to be considered wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom – it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor. (James 3:13-18, *The Message*)

The Message paraphrase of James 4:1-3, and 7-8 is equally challenging.

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it. You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way. (James 4:1-3, *The Message*)

Jesus was speaking to his closest followers. James was writing to people who professed to be followers of Jesus. Jesus and James recognized that envy and self-ambition are toxic to building community. If followers of Jesus are to truly be light in a greedy, self-centered, and vicious world, we must live with gentleness, humility, and as servants to each other and those around us.

Former President Jimmy Carter, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman are examples of the kind of living that Jesus and James emphasized. They risked their reputations and lives to help others. We do not think of their wealth, popularity, or their social status when we speak their names. We think of how the world is more humane because they lived.

It is worth noting that Jesus and James had to remind their followers that gentleness, generosity, humility, and commitment to serving others are the true measures of greatness. Jesus and James warned against the lust for prominence, power, wealth,

and status. Jesus and James had to remind their followers about the dangers of envy, pride, self-importance, and jealousy.

Their warnings and reminders are needed now like never before. Now, like never before, people who claim to be followers of Jesus are associated with hatefulness, lack of generosity, self-righteous pride, and devotion to riches.

Now, like never before, people who claim to be followers of Jesus openly and actively embrace notions of leadership that are unloving, self-centered and self-serving, arrogant, and unkind towards others who are vulnerable.

Now, like never before, people who claim to be followers of Jesus often seem more interested in attracting people of means rather than serving people in need.

Now, like never before, people who claim to be followers of Jesus are the most vocal and vicious supporters of policies that oppress immigrants, people who are homeless, people who are unpopular because of social situations, and people who are otherwise marginalized.

Jesus and James had to chastise their followers long ago and I am preaching from their words today to emphasize that true greatness has nothing to do with the size of our houses, bank accounts, wardrobes, or automobiles. True greatness has nothing to do with the grandeur of the religious shrines people build and maintain. True greatness has nothing to do with how much education people have attained in the ways of the world.

Beyond that, Jesus and James teach us that strife, violence, and disunity result from human devotion to the stuff that has nothing to do with true greatness. Jesus and James warn us that people who live for God cannot be light in a world of strife, violence, and disunity if we are obsessed with envy, selfish ambition, and how to advance ourselves above others rather than how to live in peace and harmony with others.

If people who claim to love God pooled our resources, we could establish institutions that will lend to needy people without charging them high interest. But that will require that we stop trying to compete with one another as congregations.

If people who claim to love God worked together, we could challenge vicious policies that mistreat women and girls. But that will require that we recognize women and girls as our neighbors rather than think of them as sex objects for male domination, entertainment, and conquest.

If people who claim to love God worked together, we could challenge our leaders about how the politicians are failing struggling people. We could challenge our society and world to work for peace and stop squandering resources on fighting to rob people for greater profits.

Then, we will be truly light in a dark world. Then, we will be agents of peace in a violent and vicious world. Then, we will be messengers of hospitality and welcome in a world where migrating people are considered threats rather than treasured neighbors.

When we take the words of Jesus and James to heart we won't argue about who is the greatest among us. We won't compete with each other for church members. We won't do marketing campaigns to get the "right" people to belong to congregations. We will, instead, devote ourselves to serving struggling brothers and sisters wherever they are, whoever they are, and however they are struggling.

When Howard Thurman was a boy there were only three public high schools for black children in the entire state of Florida. So young Howard packed a borrowed trunk that had no lock and no handles, roped the borrowed trunk securely, said goodbye to his mother and grandmother (his father had died years beforehand), and went to the railway station to make the trip to Jacksonville where a cousin had agreed he could live with him and his wife and have a room with one meal a day in exchange for doing chores around their house while he attended Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville, a church-supported school.

Here is how Thurman remembered his experience at the railway station.

When I bought my ticket, the agent refused to check my trunk on my ticket because the regulations stipulated that the check must be attached to trunk handle, not to a rope. The trunk would have to be sent express, but I had no money except for a dollar and few cents after I bought my ticket.

I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out. Presently, I opened my eyes and saw before me

a large pair of work shoes. My eyes crawled upward until I saw the man's face. He was a black man, dressed in overalls and a denim cap. As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, "Boy, what in hell are you crying about?" And I told him.

"If you're trying to get out of this damn town to get an education, the least I can do is to help you. Come with me," he said. He took me around to the agent and asked, "How much does it take to send this boy's trunk to Jacksonville?" Then he took out his rawhide money bag and counted the money out. When the agent handed him the receipt, he handed it to me. Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track. I never saw him again.

Years later in 1979, Howard Thurman dedicated his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, in the following words: *"To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago."*

That is what greatness looks like. That is what greatness does. That is how greatness sounds.

Amen.