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Upside-Down Greatness

Psalm 104
Mark 10:35–45

A father told of the time his car was struck by lightning while he was driving. When he was safely home, he began to tell his teenage son about his ordeal. He had hoped for at least a bit of sympathy. Instead, his son interrupted him, “Dad, let’s go buy a lottery ticket. The chances of being hit by lightning are like the chances of winning the lottery.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are just as self-absorbed as that son when they approach Jesus to say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “And what would that be?” Jesus asks. They respond, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in glory.”

And this comes immediately after Jesus has described to his disciples—for the third time—that he would soon be condemned, then handed over to the Gentiles to be humiliated and killed. Had they not been listening? Was that beyond their comprehension?

Or are they so caught up in their own dreams of power and status? None of the disciples had any idea of his crucifixion, when those who would be at his right and left sides would be criminals. And also hanging on crosses.

James and John want to be seated next to Jesus in his coming glory. And the other disciples seem to be upset with what the two brothers asked of Jesus, perhaps because they, too, had been dreaming of power and status and resented the brothers’ getting to Jesus ahead of them to make such a bold, self-serving request.

Perhaps you can identify with the disciples. Don’t we all desire to be admired and given a seat of honor? When I was in sixth grade and was asked by the teacher what I wanted to be when I grew up

I said, "Famous." It's not so much that I liked attention. As a youngster I wasn't thinking about being hounded by autograph seekers or paparazzi. (Actually, paparazzi had not entered my vocabulary) Rather, I was thinking about great people I had read about in books and seen in the movies or heard described in visits in such places as Boston, Philadelphia and Gettysburg.

I equated being famous with being someone great. Being someone great meant that I had done something outstanding in our nation or the world. I would be admired, and I would be remembered after I died.

Years later ... mid-way through college ... and then seminary It became clear that seeking to be great in the world's eyes was not what we are called to do. We are called to be servants. So my role model became Albert Schweitzer.

He was an acclaimed theologian, organist, physician, and then a medical missionary in Africa. To me Albert Schweitzer seemed the epitome of a servant, caring for the sick and disabled in Africa, finding effective treatments for malaria and leprosy. Performing life-saving surgery. But most thrilling to me ... he established a hospital, and clinics in the most isolated of areas, and trained local people to be nurses and doctors.

But when I was honest with myself, I knew I was also drawn to him because he was famous. He was famous as a great Christian. I was still seeking admiration and wanting to make a big impact.

John Calvin wrote that this gospel encounter between Jesus and James and John reflects a "bright mirror of human vanity" because "it shows that appropriate and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition, or some other vice of the flesh, so that they who follow Christ have a different object in view from what they ought to have."

This problem is not unique to those who seek to be followers of Christ. Our daily news is filled with leaders who seek their own benefit and glory rather than the benefit of others. It is so easy for us to deceive ourselves that what we do supposedly for others is simply not for their benefit but rather to meet our own needs.

Richard Foster, a Quaker author distinguishes between self-righteous service and faithful service.

Self-righteous service comes through human effort. Faithful service comes through our relationship with God.

Self-righteous service is impressed with the “big deal” and is highly concerned with results that we will accumulate. Faithful service is not concerned with results but delights in the service itself.

Self-righteous service is temporary, affected by our moods and the fads of the day. Faithful service is a lifestyle, serving because there is a need.

Self-righteous service expects external rewards. Faithful service is content in being hidden.

Self-righteous service demands the opportunity to help, insisting on meeting a need even when to do so is destructive. Faithful servants are able to listen patiently before acting and to wait patiently in silence.

Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve, fractures community, and puts others into debt or obligation. Faithful service is broad and inclusive in its ministry and builds community, heals and draws people together (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 132–133).

Somewhere along on my Christian journey I got the twisted idea that if you aren't suffering you must not really be serving God. To be a follower of Jesus requires suffering. But that's not what Jesus taught. We may suffer as disciples of Christ because his path does go against the grain. Counter-cultural. But suffering by itself is neither the goal nor the measure of our faithfulness.

Following the way of the cross doesn't call us simply to bear the burdens of life or to practice severe self-denial or passively accept violence or abuse.

For too many centuries, the Bible was used to justify slavery, and women who were being beaten by their husbands were told by their pastors (if they dared to reveal their

situation) to accept that abuse, being submissive to the one deemed the “head of the household.”

When prayers of confession name the sin of dominating others, it applies most to those who have power and wield authority in our society.

Women, people of color, persons with lower incomes—anyone treated as if they have lower status—more likely need to confess the sin of withholding their full selves than of domination. The sin of not claiming and using the power God has given them,

Serving others is not the same as being a doormat, disavowing one’s own authority, or allowing oneself to be manipulated.

Serving means being attentive to what God is calling you to be and do and making yourself available to be used as God’s feet and hands – to be the heart of God.

Mother Teresa said, “I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world.”

Jesus turns our frameworks upside down when he teaches that those who wish to be great must be the servant of all; those who wish to be first must be the slave of all. This is countercultural.

What happens in the world is what you might call the Domination System. The Domination System is characterized by power exercised **over** others, by control of others, by ranking people as winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed.

That’s a far cry from using power **with** and **for** others. The way of the cross resists this Domination System. Jesus turns things topsy-turvy from the way the world operates.

The way of Jesus, this topsy-turvy approach speaks of servant-leaders. The servant leader first-off makes sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, more free, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become

servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society?
Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

Jesus came to earth not to be served, but to serve.

He spent his life and gave his life for others.

And as his followers ... as those who claim his name ...

He teaches us to sacrifice ourselves in
service as well.

Albert Schweitzer, physician, biblical scholar, author, wrote this of
Jesus: *"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of
old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not.*

*He speaks to us the same words: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to
the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.*

*He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise
or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the
sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as
an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who
He is."* (The Quest for the Historical Jesus)

There may be nothing wrong in wishing to be great, in God's eyes.

But true greatness is not measured by how much others
notice and admire us,

nor through power, status, and fame.

To be great in God's eyes is to be a servant.

**May God continue to reshape and strengthen us to live
in this upside-down way.**