

GREATNESS ... turning **Up**ward and **Out**ward

Mark 9:30-37

Pastor Jim Rademaker

"I'm better than you are!" "No, you're not. I'm better!" "But, I'm the strongest." "I'm smarter than the rest of you guys." "I've got the best GPA." "But, Jesus loves *me* the best. Everybody knows that!" "I'm better than you are, by far!"

When that's what you've been arguing about, what do you say to Jesus when He asks you what you've been arguing about? That's right, you keep your mouth shut. You hang your head. That's what the disciples did. When Jesus asked what they were arguing about, imagine how they felt. Embarrassed? Ashamed? Like a kid with chocolate all over his face, being asked by mom where all the cookies went.

The disciples were arguing about who of them was the greatest. And how does Jesus respond? By addressing what's going on on the *inside*, in their hearts, in *your* heart.

Greatness. What does it look like? Greatness to us is to be in control. To be in charge. To call the shots. To take matters into our own hands. That's what great athletes do. That's what great leaders do. And they get credit for their accomplishments. The attention goes where? To them. Maybe we even *realize* it ourselves; how great we are, and boast at bit, at least on the inside? With eyes on *ourselves*.

When the disciples thought of greatness, where did they turn? To themselves. But true greatness, in the eyes of God, is to turn *elsewhere*.

The Corinthian Christians were great. They were wise, gifted, talented. Some were gifted speakers who knew how to motivate a crowd. Others had great understanding, having great insight into matters that others were stumped over. Others had great faith and hung in there when everybody else had given up.

But they all had one great downfall; one great flaw. And it overshadowed all their other qualities and was causing all sort of trouble in the congregation. What was their one great downfall, their one great flaw that is so disastrous to relationships? The same flaw that leads to trouble in our own relationships. Pride. Self-centeredness. They were full of themselves. Turned in on themselves.

True greatness, in the eyes of God, is to turn *elsewhere*.

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

"Oh, I'm not *religious*. I'm spiritual." Ever heard that? It's getting to be more common. What do we mean by saying "I'm spiritual, not religious?" Often times, it means "Religion is this outer, stuffy, bad thing. I'm not that. I'm better than that? I'm spiritual. It's about what's inside that matters. That's what I focus on, what's inside. And what's on the inside of me is a good thing. I'm good because I'm spiritual, which is better than those people who are only religious.

"Often times, when we think about 'spirituality', we think of it monastically, individualistically." Many of us, in other words, think about spirituality exclusively in terms of personal piety, internal devotion, and spiritual formation. We focus almost entirely on ourselves, and our private disciplines: praying, reading the Bible, and so on. That, we conclude, is what spirituality is, first and foremost.

And while personal disciplines are indispensable to our life of faith in Jesus, it's interesting that when James speaks of faith in chapter two, he says that faith, spirituality – if you will, without works is dead faith; dead spirituality. What he describes, are not works of private spirituality, but public service.

"If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?"

That's quite different from the current way our individualistic and subjectivistic culture thinks about spirituality. Almost everything that is considered "spirituality" today is private, and focuses on the inner life, and personal betterment of the individual. (Tullian Tchividjian)

Sin subtly turns us inward, upon ourselves. The Good News of God's forgiveness in Jesus, turns us away from self. Turns us upward and outward. Upward in worship, and outward in service of our neighbor - the way God created us.

It's *one* of the reasons so many of us are increasingly unhappy and depressed these days. We're trying to find happiness by looking where? Inward. Trying all kinds of things, trying all kinds of experiences, products, to make ourselves happy, when true happiness is not something we get for ourselves, but is a bi-product of turning upward in worship and outward in service. Worshipping God and loving others.

Back in the garden of Eden, what was the tempter up to? He was busy turning Adam and Eve from looking upward in worship and outward in love, to turning inward instead. *Genesis 3 ... So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, [sin took root in her heart, as she turned inward upon herself] she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [Get someone else involved in the same sin, then you can justify your actions. "Why, everybody else is doing it! I'm not the *only* one! Don't look at me!"]*

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. What were they doing? Instead of looking upward, toward God, as they always had done, they looked away from God instead, even trying to *hide* from God. *And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

Adam and Eve had *changed*. They began turning inward, instead of upward and outward. But what about God? How does He respond to them? He doesn't change. He remains the same. He reaches out in love, calling out to the two, in order to bring them back to Himself. *But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* And He's been doing that ever since, calling to you today, "Where are you?" Stop hiding and turn back to Me."

And Adam said what? "I'm sorry God. I've sinned against you. I've turned away from You. Please forgive me!" No. He said what? *"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* [God] said, *"Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"*

Again, what is Adam doing? Not turning upward towards God in confession. Not turning outward in love toward Eve. Rather, he's turning where? He's turning inward. Trying to justify himself and his actions, with his *focus* all on *himself*. And what does he end up doing? Not *loving* God and Eve, but *blaming* God and Eve.

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Eve was God's gift to Adam. And what does he do with God's gift to him? Instead of *thanking* God for His gift, he *uses* Eve as an excuse for his sin.

And we've been doing it ever since. Turning inward, instead of how God created us, to turn upward in worship and outward toward our neighbor in love. Designed to *embrace* God and others, we're now *consumed* with ourselves. The gospel causes us to look up to Christ and what he did, out to our neighbor and what they need, not into ourselves and how we're doing.

And [Jesus] said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Greatness in the kingdom of God is to be receptive. To be givable. To look to *another*. Like a child looking to her mother or father. Like a sinner looking to his or her Savior. Greatness is receiving Jesus, worshipping Jesus, bending down and receiving a lowly child. Serving, not being served. Turning upward and outward.

In one way or another, all of us want to be great. We want to be *somebody*. But how do we get there? And when we look at our lives, when we look inward, how little greatness we often see.

But when God sees you confessing your sin – when God sees you crying out in need – when God sees you caring for your hurting family member, for those suffering – when God sees you bearing other's burdens, sacrificing your

time and energy and sanity at times – when God sees you doing your ordinary, routine, unglamorous, daily, tasks in caring for others, in loving others - when God sees you turning upward to Him and outward to your neighbor ... He sees *true* greatness!

There's nothing about the gospel that fixes my eyes on me. Any version of Christianity, therefore, that encourages you to think mostly about you, is deadly to your faith - whether it's your failures or your successes; your good works or your bad works; your strengths or your weaknesses; your obedience or your disobedience. Your greatness or lack of it.

The irony, of course, is that you and I are renewed inwardly, to the degree that we turn, not inward on renewal, but upward in worship and outward in service. (Tchividjian)

Greatness. What does that look like? Greatness isn't about us being in control, us being in charge, taking matters into our own hands, accomplishing great feats, doing better than others. Greatness is really not about *us* at all. Just as Jesus said, there is only One who is good, there is only One who is truly great. And He gets all the credit. He gets all the attention. He gets all the praise.

What does that look like?

Revelation 4 ... and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ... Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments ... And around the throne ... are four living creatures ... and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty ... "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

And in response to His greatness, His power, His goodness, His faithfulness, His love, we turn, not inward in worship of self, but upward in worship of Him, and outward in love, as we have been loved.

"I'm better than you are!" "No, you're not. I'm better!" "I'm the strongest, smarter, wiser, more talented." Boasting of self and one's greatness.

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

Delivered up to be killed. Turning upward. Doing God's will. Bowing to the *True King*. Looking, not to self, but to Him. "Our Father in heaven." "Hallowed be Thy name." Thy kingdom come. "Thy will be done."

Turning outward. Philippians 2 ... *though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant ... And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!

A Father, giving His Son. A Son, looking to the Father, and giving His life. All *for you!* It doesn't get any greater than that!