

February 22, 2009

Matthew 5:1-16 / Romans 12:1-2 / Luke 9:46-48
 Jesus – Turning the World’s Value System Upside Down

Today we come to another one of those passages where Jesus takes the value system of the world and turns it on its end — something He did OFTEN in the Gospels! NOT because He simply enjoyed being contrary, or loved to stir up controversy, or wanted to be novel, or different or a trend-setter.

No! He did it because He had to! He did it because He couldn’t be true to God and the Gospel unless He did! He did it because He could not be consistent or true to the nature and teaching of the Kingdom of God if He did not challenge accepted worldly ways of thinking, feeling, responding and living.

You see, for Jesus, life was all about God and all about His Kingdom and all about the Gospel of His grace. / It was all about the way God wants things done or living life as God intended! / It was about pleasing God and doing what God thought was important and doing it in such a way that it brought glory to God!

And what Jesus is doing in this passage (and others like it where He takes the accepted forms of human thinking and reasoning and flips them on end), is simply trying to get us to see how life is lived when we adopt God’s perspective on things instead of the generally accepted human perspective on things — a perspective that is inevitably distorted by collective human fallenness or sin.

That’s the **FIRST** thing we must consider and understand if we are ever to grasp Jesus counter-culture or seemingly counter-intuitive teachings (such as we find in this passage and the verses to follow).

We must to understand that such teachings obviously presuppose that humanity is fallen, and that because of that fallenness humanity has adopted values and ideas and priorities and ways of evaluating people or determining the importance of things that are NOT what God intended.

In fact, in many cases (as in this morning’s text) they are totally contrary to what God wants or intends. And because they are, they must be changed if we are ever view things and do things in a way that pleases God.

And in regard to this morning's text the thing that needs to change is the way we often view people, set priorities and carry worldly forms of competitiveness into the church or our relationships with other Christians.

It's a problem every Christian has to deal with — carrying worldly ways of thinking, or worldly ways of relating, or worldly objectives, or worldly goals into our Christian life, which calls us to rid ourselves of worldly patterns of doing things!

Paul addresses this very issue in Romans 12:2, where after explaining in great detail the Gospel message in the first 11 chapters, he then switches gears and begins the application part of the book by telling the Roman believers:

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

It's just another way of telling all the believers in the church in Rome (and us through them) that all of us (due to both NATURE and NURTURE) are products of our culture. We've been formed by and have adopted (often without realizing it) worldly patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, living, responding and relating to one another.

And Paul says that although that is true, we must not allow those worldly patterns of thought to continue governing the way we think, the things we pursue, the priorities we set, the way we feel about ourselves and others, or the way we interact with or respond to others.

Part of being a Christian is realizing that being in the world has often taught us wrong ways of thinking about things — ways we must unlearn as we proceed to adopt a whole new way of viewing them.

The world has formed in us many of the life-patterns that we still follow. But Jesus and Paul both teach that we are no longer to allow ourselves to be conformed to the patterns the world has formed in us, but be transformed as we allow the Gospel and the Holy Spirit to change the way we view everything in life.

Being a Christian is more than simply being saved. It is also adopting a whole new view of life, and relationships, and what is good, right and fair. And that is what Jesus is trying to get them to do in this passage — change the way we think. And in this particular case the way we measure greatness and how we set about trying to attain it.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. The whole issue of seeking “greatness” as opposed to pursuing what I will call “greatestness”! And I say “greatestness,” because that’s what Jesus has a problem with! Striving to be the greatest is to bring worldly ways of thinking into the church. Because it’s one thing to pursue greatness. It’s quite another thing to seek and strive to be the “greatest.”

To pursue “greatness” can simply mean seeking to make a difference, seeking to do something worthwhile with your life or simply living or dying for a noble cause. But to pursue “greatestness” is different, because it’s driven by the desire to outdo everyone else! It’s to see everyone else as opponents or competitors. It’s fueled by a worldly view of one-upmanship, or the desire to be known as better than everyone else!

You can pursue “greatness” without any hint of competitiveness or one-upmanship, but not so when it comes to wanting to be the greatest! That always involves the need to win and trounce and outdo or come in ahead of others — a desire that shouldn’t even enter the brain of one Christian in relation to another Christian.

As Paul tells the Corinthians who were always trying to compete with one another, or outdo one another in terms of who was the most spiritual, “Those who measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves are not wise.”

It’s the same message Jesus had for the disciples in today’s text. In the Family of God we need to do away with the competitive mindset and realize that striving for pride of place, and especially striving to be the greatest, is always wrong!

You see, the problem is not so much the pursuit of greatness. One can pursue greatness with virtuous motives. But one can rarely, if ever, strive to be the greatest with virtuous motives — at least not from a Christian standpoint.

Because the desire to be “the greatest” is ego driven. / It’s pride driven. / It’s driven by the need to feel superior. / It’s the result of an insecure, competitive “I must beat the opposition to have worth” mentality, which craves the place of exaltation, and sees all others as inferior.

That’s why Jesus responds here as He does. Because the desire to be the greatest is contrary to both grace and Gospel-like thinking. It’s sub-Christian and follows patterns of thinking drilled into us by the world. He won’t even speak in terms of the “greatest.”

And here, lest I appear to be contradicting the text, I need to point out that this is one place where the NIV missed the whole point Jesus was trying to make! Because in the Greek Jesus does NOT say in verse 48: "He who least among you all — he is the greatest." Not at all! What Jesus says is literally, "He who is least among you all — this one is great." That's it! It's "*me-gas*" in the Greek — not "the greatest," but simply "great!"

To use the term "greatest" is automatically to use competitive terms. It would simply perpetuate among the disciples and in the church, the worldly, ego-driven or pride-driven mindset of competitiveness that He is trying to do away with!

It's such a subtle difference that we often miss the fact that Jesus refuses to talk in terms of "the greatest," because that would merely spur prideful competition for who can be the least! That's why He refuses to even use that term!

Rather, He redefines what greatness is, encourages us to see that even the least already is great, and in the process does away completely with the ego-based, pride-based, competition-based pattern of thinking that the disciples are inadvertently bringing into the faith from outside the faith, and are now trying to establish in the Church.

And Jesus will have no part of it! He must rebuke them, because in the Kingdom of God, it's NEVER about striving to be the greatest. It's NEVER about trying to attain the honor of outdoing your brothers and sisters or being the top dog or the king of the hill!

Competition is wonderful in sports. And having the competitive edge is also necessary in business. But it's deadly in the church, and actually causes one to go backwards in their spiritual walk.

To strive to be the "greatest" is always to lose ground or go backward in one's spiritual walk. It is NEVER a sign of growth or progress in the Christian life, but rather an indication the person has missed the whole point of the grace God offers in the Gospel!

Then **THIRD**, Jesus teaches us that we must not only do away with the worldly desire to be the greatest, but we must also redefine what greatness is and how one goes about pursuing it. And as a means of doing so, Jesus takes a LITTLE child from the crowd, and has that LITTLE child stand beside Him — the stress being on the word LITTLE — a child maybe two or three years old.

And what does a child have to do with greatness, we might ask? Absolutely nothing if we go by the world's standard of measurement! WHY? Because a little child hasn't lived long enough to accumulate a long list of impressive accomplishments.

He hasn't lived long enough to stand out in the crowd as one whose achievements cause people to stand back in awe and amazement and an almost worshipful envy of their talents that says "Look how smart he or she is, and all they've has done!" Because to be the greatest (by the world's standards) is almost always equated with superior talent, outstanding ability, exceptional achievements or accomplishments that stand out as far superior in comparison to others.

Not so in the Kingdom of God! Which is why Jesus can pull a little child aside, have him or her stand next to Him, and use that little child as a way of redefining greatness and showing them that greatness in the KOG has NOTHING WHATSOEVER to do with greatness as the world measures it!

You see, what we need to know to understand Jesus concept of greatness is that in His day (as nearly all the commentaries point out), children were essentially nobodies. It was better in Israel than in the surrounding nations, but it was still a prevalent notion.

As Darrel Bock points out, children were people *"with little status in the ancient world. In that world a child was barely seen and not heard at all. In Judaism, where children were held in more respect than in other ancient cultures, it still was often considered a waste of time to teach one under twelve the Torah."* In fact [one section from the Talmud] reads, *'Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chatting with children and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man'* (m. 'Abot 3:10)."

R. T. France notes the same thing: *"A child was a person of no importance in Jewish society, subject to the authority of his elders, and not to be taken seriously...one to be looked after but not looked up to....It is then, the status of the child (as insignificant in the minds of people) that is the point, rather than any supposedly characteristic quality in children..."*

Children were to be seen and not heard. Their opinions counted for nothing. In fact, until they reached a certain age, they were essentially nothing. They were seen as the "least" in society.

And in His typically graphic and radical fashion, Jesus (by pointing to this insignificant child as an example of greatness) totally reverses the world's scale of measuring importance. He took a little child, set him next to Him and said: ***"Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all — this one is great."***

Do you see what Jesus does? He not only equates greatness with insignificance, but goes on to say that the one who is least already ***"is great!"***

By the world's standards greatness is "achieved." But by Jesus' standard, greatness is something one possesses simply by being created in the image of God!

The child is great, and the one who is least among us all is great simply by virtue of the fact that he is! Insignificant or not (by human or worldly standards) he is a human being created by God and in His image — and that alone is enough to make him great! He doesn't need to achieve anything in order to become great, he already is great! That's what Jesus says!

If He had been using worldly standards of measuring greatness He would have said, "He who STRIVES to become the least among you all, can by attaining that goal, become great." But that's NOT what He says! He says ***"For he who least among you all (the one who is already in that position, like this little child) — this one is great."*** He's "great" and he hasn't done or accomplished ANYTHING – not one notable thing!

Greatness then is conferred and not earned. It's a gift that is ours by virtue of being and not by virtue of achieving. It isn't something one attains, or needs to strive for, it's something one possesses, even the least and most insignificant person of all being "great"

The dirty, uneducated street urchin, dressed in tattered rags and living in destitute poverty in the slums of some third world city is "great" in the eyes of Jesus — the only standard of measure that should matter to us as Christians!

How the world measures greatness should be of no concern to us. Because it's how Jesus measures greatness that should determine for us how we measure greatness. That's part of "being transformed by the renewing of our minds."

We need to retrain the way I think to be in accordance (or conformity) with what Jesus says, and not what the world says!

Which brings us to our LAST point—everyone, even the weak and lowly, the insignificant and the outcast, the poor and the unnoticed who have done nothing notable except maybe to survive by eking out a meager existence, is great in the eyes of Jesus. And if we are to have renewed and transformed minds, we must reprogram our thinking to conform to that of Jesus instead of the world. Radical as it is, and contrary as it is to the way the world thinks, that is what Jesus teaches, and that is how Jesus wants us to think, live and act.

I mean think of it: If we were in a huge crowd of people (as we can assume Jesus and the disciples were that day), and I said to you (before this morning's message!) go out and find, or bring me back someone who is "great," who would you have gone looking for? What criteria would you have used to determine greatness?

Would you have looked for a doctor, lawyer, professor, author or expert on some topic? Some corporate executive or wealthy business man? Would you have sought out some major league baseball star, NFL football player, movie star or rock star?

Some Nobel Prize winner, maybe, or some mayor, governor, senator, hall of fame athlete, or famous televangelist? Someone you'd like your photo taken with (even hoping they'd sign it so you could display your picture with them on your wall)?

Would you have struggled to find a person of significant accomplishment? Or like Jesus, would you (without hesitation) have picked out a little, insignificant, 2-3 year old child. Would you have? Not the child of some famous person, but a nameless little child from the crowd. Would you have?

Because if you would have looked for the standout person of significant accomplishment, then you can know that your criteria for measuring greatness is more influenced by the patterns of this world than by Jesus. Because in the Kingdom of God — all are great, even the least of the least!

Because by Jesus standard "greatness" is not a matter of what we do or achieve, it's a gift. And when we realize that we will also realize why we need to accept others for Him, and in His name.

"Whoever welcomes this little child (and He means any person of insignificance) in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

The little child in this case, does not simply represent little children, he represents ALL who are considered least, or nobodies, or unimportant, or somehow insignificant in the eyes of the world.

Notice that when Jesus looked for someone great He did not look up and try to find someone who stood out in the crowd, but looked down to the one no one else would even have noticed — like this child — though he could have picked a leper, or a beggar, or a cripple or some other unnoticed person.

That's Jesus point. Like Him we are to welcome all that the world overlooks and all the world deems insignificant. We are to take notice of them and make them feel accepted and significant and valued — for to do so, as Jesus tells us, is to welcome Him and the One who sent Him. In fact, to do so is the essence of true greatness.

So, let me close with this morning, not with a prayer of my own, but a Puritan Prayer that so well expresses the thought of today's text. A prayer I will ask you to pray with me and make your own:

*LORD, High and Holy, Meek and Lowly,
You have brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths, but see Thee in the heights.
Hemmed in by the mountains of sin, I behold Your glory.*

*Let me learn by paradox...
That the way down is the way up,
That to be low is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
That to have nothing is to possess all,
That to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
That to give is to receive,
That the valley is the place of vision.*

*LORD, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter Your stars shine.*

*Let me find: Your light in my darkness; Your joy in my sorrow;
Your grace in my sin; Your riches in my poverty; Your glory in my valley.
In Jesus name and for the sake of His glory I pray. Amen.*