



Upside Down Ethics

Hebrews 5:1-10 & Mark 10:35-45
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Tradition has it that at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, the final significant battle of the American Revolution, the British band played the English ballad: “The World Turned Upside Down.” The ballad was originally written as a protest to Oliver Cromwell’s puritanical restrictions on Christmas celebrations, but the minds of the British might have been thinking about what the implications of the loss to the American revolutionaries really meant to their world view. Things were changing in the British realm; no longer would governance be from the top down in the colonies, but rather from the bottom up. It was something that British sensibilities at the time just couldn’t fathom.

The same may have been true for the disciples of Jesus Christ. They repeatedly appear in the gospels to not quite get what Jesus is driving at in parables, teachings and preaching. They can’t get their heads around the very radical and different call that Jesus was placing on their lives and on their world view. It was something that their sensibilities just couldn’t fathom.

The passage from Mark highlights this great disconnect between the teachings of Jesus Christ and the comprehension of his disciples. James and John understand just how the world works: if you are close to power, then do what you can to gain power for yourself. If you’re not the king yourself, the best place for you is to be a part of the king’s court; to have the ear of the king. Jesus is the Messiah; he is coming into power, what better place for them to ask for a little personal favor now and again? The disciples, like the British, just can’t fathom any other way in this world.

This is what turns the disciples’ world upside down; Jesus’ response to their request as if acquisition and possession of power was the way through for them. Jesus says, quite plainly: ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

James D. Smart, in his interpretation of this passage published thirty years ago, wrote rather accurately:

“In thinking of the new age [James and John] cannot conceive of any kind of order other than what now exists. The kingdom for them is the same old world with a new set of rulers. If only they possessed the power everything would be transformed. They would speedily put an end to the world's evils.”

The disciples don’t get it; just as we are tempted to ignore what Jesus is really saying. It’s not about the possession of power; it’s not about getting others to serve you or offer you a seat at the banquet table of power. Instead, being a follower of Jesus Christ is about being of service. “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve ...”

There's the very thing that is difficult for us to see. We are so comfortable with the way things are in this world that we often miss what God is calling us to do: to serve; to turn the world upside down by our denial of the principles by which this old world works. We are called to radical selflessness in a world that prizes, treasures and rewards self-interest and grasping for power.

Again, Dr. Smart has it right:

“To participate in the coming of such a kingdom was not to rule but to serve, so to serve that God in his own way might rule. The service first and foremost was an enslavement to God's word and so to God's purpose for his world.”

In Jesus Christ, God is calling us to forget what the world teaches and rewards and turn instead to what God wants for the world. It's a difficult, life-changing and whole of life taking process for us to do that. We are dependent upon witnesses to this truth to help light our path and show us the way.

Consider, in your own lives, then the witnesses that God has placed alongside you to help light this path. These are servants of the living God who have demonstrated to you, in ways great and small, that real power in the kingdom of God comes from emptying oneself and taking up the role of the servant; of sacrificing in some way to make room and make way for others.

I can think of one such witness that I have known. His name was Bill and he was an elder in one of my previous churches. He was quite a wonderful guy. Usually quiet and unassuming, he did, however exert real leadership in that congregation and became for me a grand example of what it means to be an elder in the Presbyterian Church, but even more so, a great example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

He told me once about his personal joy of the beginning of each month. He would sit down at the beginning of each month, gather his bills and his checkbook and begin settling his accounts. Before he put pen to checkbook, before the gas, electric, or first credit card bill was paid, Bill took accounts of his income from the past month and wrote out a check for 10 percent of it (a tithe) and sent it off to the church.

He said that nothing quite compared to the joy he had in doing this. He spoke of how it reminded him first and foremost that his life and what he possessed were not his own, but rather belonged, wholly and completely to God. He truly believed that his tithe, this commitment to God was no mere obligation but was the very thing that kept him rooted as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ. It was, in essence, his witness to himself to remind him that he was not his own, but belonged, body and soul, to Jesus Christ.

Of course, good Christian stewardship was not the only way in which Bill's life testified to an upside down ethic when compared to the world. You could also see it in the manner of how he treated others, how he conducted his business in the community, and how he was often the first to raise his hand and help others who had no way to repay him for his kindness ... he did so because he decided that he had been called to serve rather than be served.

We, like those disciples, may find all of this hard to understand and even more difficult to enact, but it strikes me that is essential for any who call themselves a Christian: that we ought to serve rather than be served. And in doing so, it may just be that our world and all the world will be turned upside down. Thanks be to God.