

Message: Serve Others with Great Love

“Is it good to be great?”

Henri Nouwen is a famous Christian teacher, author, and spiritual leader, who is well-known around the world. Nouwen was a Catholic priest, born in the Netherlands, who was ordained and later received a Ph.D. in theology. Nouwen was recognized for his work in social justice and his deep writing on spirituality, reflecting his own struggles with depression, loneliness and other challenges in transparent ways that have helped millions.

Nouwen served as a professor at Notre Dame University, Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools. Yet, with all those accomplishments, Nouwen felt unsettled. So he began to split his time between teaching and serving in Latin America. In the 1980s Nouwen met Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, a community serving the severely disabled.

This association led Nouwen to resign from Harvard and move to L’Arche Daybreak to serve, living in a communal setting of twelve – four disabled adults and eight caregivers. Nouwen later gave his path a specific term, calling it the path of downward mobility, in contrast to the path of upward mobility so popular in the 1980s.

Henri Nouwen died in 1996, leaving behind a legacy of teaching, service and Christian leadership that continues to touch the lives of millions of Protestants and Catholics each day. And yet, if he had not done what he had, giving up a life of acclaim, seeking a different path, a path focused on serving others first, putting them ahead of even his own ambitions and desire, would we still know who he is today?

It’s an amazing life story, yet it isn’t all that unusual in Christian circles. Anyone heard of Mother Teresa? How about Eric Liddell of “Chariots of Fire” fame? Or Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision?

Let me re-phrase the question I asked earlier: **is it good to have accomplishments and achievements?** The answer is yes. God does not despise or turn away from greatness. The real question is: what is greatness? In Mark 9:30-37, Jesus redefines what greatness is and tells us how we can become great in God’s eyes.

We have to step back for a second to put Jesus’ conversation with the disciples in perspective. The disciples have experienced some amazing revelations. First, Peter realizes Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus quickly moves to help the disciples realize the Messiah’s mission is different than what they were expecting. Jesus’ disciples are called to “... *deny themselves and take up their cross and follow...*” (Mark 8:34). Second, Peter, James and John have THE mountaintop experience with Jesus when they see him transfigured, shining with glory, talking with Moses and Elijah. They come down from the mountain dazed and confused, only to meet a large crowd at the foot of the mountain. The crowd isn’t happy. The disciples have been struggling with their faith in the face of challenging circumstances and the people aren’t satisfied. Jesus does what is needed, but he challenges the disciples.

Perhaps you know the nature of Jesus’ challenge. Has anyone ever gone on a hike in the mountains? I remember going hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We stopped one day at a small park for a 2.5-mile hike. We got out of the car, prepared ourselves and easily walked across the parking lot to the beginning of the trail - so far, so good. We decided to take the easy trail to the top. We were more interested in the view than strenuous effort.

The trail was easy. There were plants and trees to enjoy, good conversation and pleasant company. The first section was fairly flat; the second section had a slight incline. As we wound our way around the hill, the scenery began to open up. The third section was slightly steeper, but still gave no difficulties. We were getting our second wind, so the fourth section was easy as well. We came around the corner to the fifth and final section and that’s when we faced it.

There was a steep, rocky climb directly in front of us. The hill fell off dramatically to the other side. There was no other way up. If we wanted to follow our leader to the top of the hill, we had to tackle the slope. There was no more time to wait, no other route to follow. We had to make the decision to accept the challenge and move ahead.

That’s exactly what the disciples were facing. From the time he called his disciples Jesus was preparing and equipping them to be his followers, those who would lead. Now, time was running short. That’s

why Jesus was speaking with the disciples in private (vv30-31) as they traveled through Galilee. Jesus tells them what is to come saying, “*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*” (v31). This is a prophecy of Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection.

Mark makes sure we know the disciples didn’t understand. We can sympathize. Jewish tradition spoke of the Messiah as an earthly king. They’ve seen miraculous signs. The idea the Messiah would have to die and be raised in their lifetime is foreign. Yes, he would die later and be raised, but not now, at that time. They haven’t experienced Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection. We have as readers of Mark’s gospel.

Today, one parallel would be the idea that our favorite football team is going to play a big game. Everyone is prepared and practices have gone well, when the star quarterback announces he’s going to play the game with one arm tied behind his back - literally. We just won’t get it.

The disciples were still thinking in human ways, not in God’s ways. They’re still thinking of themselves as the entourage of the new king and head of the temple. Jesus is coming to set things right and they’re going to benefit as the leaders of the new temple. We still do that today. What we don’t realize is the extent of the change Jesus is bringing.

So the disciples are doing what comes naturally to all of us. They’re bickering over who’s going to get what position and title in the new temple under Jesus. This is like the water cooler conversation at work when there’s a new position open, or when we’re talking with other parents and grandparents about how great our kids are, no matter whether it’s academically, on the playing field or in the recital hall.

Proverbs 11:2 says, *‘When pride comes, disgrace follows, but with humility follows wisdom.’* And James 4:6 adds, *‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’*

We know the Bible warns us about pride. We know the pitfalls that go along with pride. We even work not to be filled with pride. “Let’s take the ‘Atkin Test,’ the Danny Atkin ‘painful pride’ test to see how we’re doing. Listen to the following questions and answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ mentally to each one:

- Am I upset if I am not praised for my work?
- Do I like and even long to sit at the head table in the seat of honor?
- Do I seek credit for what others have done?
- Do honorary titles pump me up?
- Is popularity crucial to my sense of self-worth?
- Am I a name dropper of those I know (or pretend to know?!)
- Do I think I have something valuable to say about almost everything?”¹

How did you do? I won’t ask for a show of hands. We failed the test. I know I did. And I ask your forgiveness for those times when my pride overwhelms my love and desire to serve. It’s not an easy thing to admit when we are full of it – pride, but it’s important. As author Tony Merida tweeted, “The gospel frees us from our addiction to ourselves!”² We certainly see that lived out in Mark 9.

Jesus popped the bubble of the disciple’s pride when he asked the simple question, “*What were you arguing about on the way?*” What was their response? Silence. They knew Jesus was calling them out. They knew they had been focused on the material, on the rewards they were anticipating, rather than what they had just experienced on the mountain top and Jesus’ challenge to their faith.

Jesus shows his disciples – then and now, the truly radical nature of what it means to be his followers. When he got home, he had the 12 disciples sit down so the group was focused, rested and quiet, and said, “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*” (v35). This is a reversal of everything the world knows and seeks.

Today’s world, particularly the Western world, is all about performance. The ideals of former years: one career, long-term employment at one or two loyal firms, earning a steadily increasing income, even home ownership, are things of the past, like it or not. Today’s world is all about fast-pace, multitasking and personal branding. Each person is a producer of information as well as a consumer and value is assigned to those who produce the most popular products. Have the most popular blog or YouTube videos? Turn that into branded products and make

¹ I Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*, Holman Reference, Nashville, TN, 2014, p. 194

²Ibid, p 191

your fortune. Just don’t forget that yesterday’s product is like old fish – it stinks and must be thrown out for what is fresh and new tomorrow.

Please understand me: I’m not saying today’s world is bad or wrong. It is what we have made it. What I am saying is that Jesus’ message of servant discipleship is just as radical and just as important to his followers today as it was in the first century. We have to embrace the transforming reversal of Jesus’ commandments to “love God and love our neighbors as ourselves” without pride and ego leading us astray.

When our goal is to bring glory and honor to God in all that we do, achievements and accomplishments will come, but they will not be the focus of our service to God. Rev. Billy Graham has more awards and accolades than we could list during this service, yet he is one of the most humble people you could meet. He lives the image of Christ who was “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). A life devoted to Jesus is a life where we follow God’s path, which often leads to downward mobility.

Followers of Jesus are called to prioritize our lives and, wherever and whenever possible, to simplify our lives by inviting Jesus into our lives. If you find yourself more and more stressed out, living at a faster and faster pace, struggling to keep up with ways to be connected to family, friends and work 24x7, Jesus has a word for you. It’s found in v37, *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

Jesus is saying our position, titles, income, responsibilities and obligations are unimportant when compared to God’s love. Jesus brought a young child into the group. He did so to illustrate a point. That young child was helpless and completely dependent on others in the community. There was nothing the child could do to change his or her situation. That child was no better than any other child or person, regardless of their position, fame or income. And yet Jesus loved the child and cared for the child.

God knows our circumstances and loves us in spite of what we do. We are no more important than anyone else in the world in God’s eyes. Our titles, accomplishments, the quality of our belongings, income level,

and even our health do not matter. Certainly, God does not care about our skin color, language, gender or sexual orientation. We are all God’s children. Let’s not focus on the things that separate us, that give us the edge over others, but on the things that unite us and help us live in love and harmony with God.

Invite Jesus into your life. Make room for him. That means giving up something or simplifying your life a bit so the Holy Spirit has room to work and grow in your heart. I know, it sounds hard, but it’s important, no matter whether you are young or old. That’s because there is great joy in living and walking with Jesus each and every day.

Struggling with a decision or a challenge? Make room for Jesus and ask the Holy Spirit to show you the path where you are saying “yes” to God. If you truly do that, I guarantee there are benefits. There is a peace and contentment you can’t find anywhere else when your prayers and decisions flow from your love of God. You are putting Jesus in charge and letting him use you to reach others, for you are God’s child.

Is it good to be great?

Yes, when we let God lead and guide us by faith.

Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”