

“Building A Vision”  
Psalm 1  
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
Mark 9:30-37

Jesus teaches that the first will be last and the servant of all.

When researchers at Duke, Harvard, and Northwestern asked investors how their mutual funds performed last year compared with Standard & Poor’s 500-stock index, a third claimed their funds outperformed the market by at least 5 percent. One in six said their funds fared better by more than 10 percent. However, a check of the portfolios belonging to those claiming to have beaten the market showed that 88 percent had overestimated their earnings. The study discovered that some “market beaters” lagged between 5 to 15 percent behind the S&P.<sup>1</sup>

Don Moore of Northwestern stated, “Everybody wants to believe they’re better than average.”<sup>2</sup> When I ponder Don Moore’s statement, I realize that I often compare myself to others and conclude that I’m better than average as a pastor, parent, grandparent, friend and Christian. What is it about human nature, even human nature in the process of conversion, that overestimates its worth?

Jesus teaches that the first will be last and the servant of all. How is this a compelling vision for life? Losing one’s life and finding it is a process of change shaping us more and more into thinking, speaking, and living the words and deeds of Jesus. In this regard, Bobby Schuller in *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World* writes,

What would you dare to achieve if you knew you could not fail?... Dr. Schuller used to say, “Build your dream, and your dream will build you.” This axiom is true.... Build a dream for your family, your vocation, and your walk with God. Though your dream may change over time, simply having a clear picture of what you want to be and what you want to achieve will dramatically alter your character and sense of well-being for the better.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The source of this story is *Money*, January 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Bobby Schuller, *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Books, 2019), 97-98.

A vision for life that is focused on being first is self-centered not other centered. Therein lies the significance of thinking and self-examination: Learn. Evaluate. Plan. Dream. Get back up after a fall. Press through the pain.<sup>4</sup> Building a vision that is worth living is one that dreams of serving others. Truly, living as a servant, which is last place according to the dominant human perspective, is first place according to God's perspective.

The Psalter, Epistle, and Gospel Readings promote the value of building a vision for life based on God's law, wisdom, and plan for discipleship. Psalm 1:1 reads, "Happy are those who.... Do not take the path that sinners tread." James 3:8 reads, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." And Mark 9:36-37 reads, "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.'" Followers of Jesus would do well to follow God's path of being a servant to all.

In Mark 9:30-37, Jesus announces his pending death. The disciples don't get it and that's understandable. Jesus translates his predicted death in the relational terms of discipleship. Being a follower of Jesus, a disciple, involves suffering. Jesus uses his suffering to invite his disciples to perceive how his words and deeds gave opportunity for demonstrating mercifulness, peacemaking, generosity, wisdom, and submitting to the Father's will of loving God and loving others. Jesus, the Suffering Servant, set forth a Messiah who loved his enemies and refused to restore a people to power and privilege.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Adapted from Bobby Schuller, *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World*, 33.

<sup>5</sup>In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Kimberly Bracken Long, Osvaldo D. Vena, Michael Lodahl, Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, and Peter J. Paris in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 323-325, 326-328, 328-330, 331-333 and 333-334.

Invest your life in the lives of others. Real greatness comes through serving and welcoming the powerless. Being a servant portrays joy and blessing, a life not missing the abundance of the good life promised by God. Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth and the life," the words of the Greatest Commandment, and the words of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25 outline what being a servant looks like. Jesus' words offer a vision for one's life that is compelling. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (In-Person with COVID-19 protocols and Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 19 September 2021 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in the Sanctuary at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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