

Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life

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SUBVERSIVE EXCELLENCE

How has an attempt of yours to enforce holiness diminished the glory of God?

What is your biggest fear that keeps you from serving everyone all the time?

What would it take for you to regard the world's system as irrelevant?

Mark 10:42-45 – ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

I) Established Order...

Most of us have lived a certain way our whole lives. The dynamics of authority, power, rule, and wealth are intrinsic to our way of life. We have small degrees of choice how we relate to these, but essentially we are trapped within the system. This very fact is the cause of much of today's societal tumult in America. It was the same at the time of Jesus. Ruling classes ruin life for the commoner. Arguments about morality are for the sake of deciding who to punish. Culture's purpose is to tell us who to hate. The economy is worshipped. We recognize none of this leads to a good end when we wake to spiritual realities. Our first instinct after being redeemed to God is to use the system to advance His people. Jesus denies us that possibility.

◆ **Selfish rule:** Israel had hoped for centuries for their Messiah by the time Jesus was born. They clung to the prophecies that God would

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restore their independence and the glory that was due to His people. They would be free to use the world's system to enforce God's way of life and defend themselves from all the unholy. It's the same thing many of us hope for from Jesus. Forgiveness leads to favor, favor to peace and prosperity. He rejects this. He defines selfish rule as the way of the unholy, saying "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them... (Mark 10:42)" The pursuit of rule is denial of our corruptible nature and God's divine sovereignty.

◆ **Personal glory:** The deceit of the world is that humanity is its own standard. Its own standard of beauty, worthiness, excellence, virtue. Perfection is relative, warping the sign of God's favor. Greatness is a competition won in one of two ways. The obvious is to fulfill one's own potential to the highest degree. The devious is to diminish other's ability to fulfill theirs. Jesus identifies this method with the unholy, telling His followers about the Gentiles that "their great ones are tyrants over them (v42)." Ideals that can be achieved by diminishment dishonor God. The one who best fulfills some ideal is an accident of God, uniquely superior and independently glorious. God cannot either conceive perfection or cause it to be. This way of life denies God.

II) Glorious Ways...

Let's be generous in our thinking. The system in which we live has been developed over generations by people trying to make the most of life. That idea, *the most of life*, means...what? Long life? Most happiness? Largest inheritance to pass down? Perhaps it means each generation is more perfect than the last. The problem of relative perfection is clearer as confronted by this question. Jesus came to free us from slavery to mere survival. He inhabits God's purpose for humanity and defines the divine standard of human perfection. His ideals have no relation to diminishment. He avoids systems, choosing the simplicity of one thing at a time ordered by the will of His Father. The revelation is that simplicity is the glorious way.

◆ **Elevate everyone:** Ideal systems elevate the average person. That elusive, imaginary person who represents all of us. Average lifespan. Average health. Average income. They increase the indicators we decide signify quality life measured across everyone. Everyone that matters, anyway. Averages are skewed by extremes and ignore small populations. They ignore individuals. Jesus denies systems, saying "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant... (v43)" One is not worthy of a

position in the system by being better than another. One strives for perfection by serving others. Elevating another toward their best. Bending the world toward the perfect conception of God, in which every creature is good and worthy by the fact of having been created.

◆ **Radical faith:** If the standard of human excellence is elevating others, the greatest are those who do so for everyone with whom they have direct contact. Each person to whom we deny this service is a mark of **our own imperfection**. Loving service is the goal by which we accomplish our life's purpose and grow into the perfect standard of humanity as judged by God. We are not excellent because of loving service but become excellent from necessity as we do the work. We will not give and give and give when we accept as true our sense's observation that we lack more. Elevating one person is difficult. "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (v44)," is impossible as we are. We must believe He will first elevate us.

III) Overthrow...

Jesus' ways are not better than the world's. They are subversive to them. Jesus clearly defines what it is to make the most of life and offers a way to achieve it. His way leaves the established order powerless as it can neither cause nor inhibit human excellence. Its only use is as an object of contrast by which to see the perfection of Jesus and His ways all the clearer. The old order is overthrown as it is ignored.

◆ **Follow the Leader:** Living within the system, we look to find where our abilities fit and make the most of the life available to that role in society. We identify the standard of excellence for that station and follow it as best we can. We might even dream to exceed it and become the new standard of perfection. Jesus frees us from the constraints of the system and our innate ability. His definition of good life is available to each of us because it is not based on skill but on the gifts of goodness given by God. Jesus tells us we can be the "slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (v44-45)." Each of us is equally qualified to elevate those around us.

◆ **Render irrelevant:** We overthrow the established order by loving service. When we elevate another toward their best, they do not need the world's system. It is rendered irrelevant. Jesus gave "his life a ransom for many (v45)." Ransomed from the system of ideals that diminishes and denies the glory of God. Freed to be elevated into divine excellence, which itself elevates others into divine excellence. There is no clearer sign that we serve a perfect God.