

The Long Walk to Irrelevance

James 3:13-4:8

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Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

*"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."*

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 3:13-4:8, NRSV)

In fourth grade, I beat Vance Campbell to win my age group
at the Wauseon Parks and Recreation Department's ping-pong tournament.

My age group covered fourth through seventh grade,
and Vance was in seventh grade.

So . . . yeah.

I mean, if you wanted to say David beats Goliath,
I wouldn't object.

A few days later, a photo of me standing beside
hulking seventh-grade, second-place Vance
was printed in the *Fulton County Expositor*, our local newspaper.

So again, yeah.

But my promising athletic career didn't end there.

I played sports year-round, and, in high school,

I had quite a bit of success in cross country and track.
And when I say quite *a bit*, I really mean quite *a lot*.
I also played basketball in high school,
and, at the year-end banquet,
I won the Intensity Award. Twice.
Okay, that's a very different award than most valuable player
and some other ones,
but still, I won it . . . twice.
So how do you like me now?

That's enough.
I am completely uncomfortable talking like this, even in jest,
even about things that happened decades ago.
And do you know why that is?
Well, it's mostly because I don't want to appear self-centered.
Do you see the irony in that?
A big reason why I would never boast
about these and other more recent accomplishments
reflects the same attribute in if I would.
Ultimately, it reflects self-centeredness --
it wouldn't help *me* in *my* project of advancing *my* interests.
This lust for recognition, for success, for power, for glory, for relevance, for a legacy,
I recognize it in me.
And I think it's true for all of us, to some extent.
We keep it hidden, but we are always battling it.
Sometimes, we even make it look like service.

*If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not be boastful and false to the truth.*

*Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.
For where there is envy and selfish ambition,
there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.*

*"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble." (James 3:14-16, 4:6)*

As I've thought about these words from James --
words that are echoed throughout scripture from beginning to end --
it struck me how counter-cultural they are.
I mean, when you think about it,
our whole economy not only rewards selfish ambition,
it depends on it.
And you only need to look at commercials, advertisements, Facebook, Twitter,
Instagram, Tik-Tok, SnapChat,
to know how much we are fascinated with ourselves.
We want to know how we measure up in comparison to others,

and we know others are doing the same to us.
It is so hard to get away from doing that.

Priest and author Henri Nouwen wrote a book about Christian leadership,
and, in it, he communicated something that I find so hard to swallow,
but, the older I get, the more I recognize it as true,
not only for leaders, but for all who intend to follow Jesus.

Adapting his words just a bit, he writes:

*I am deeply convinced that [Christians] are called to be completely irrelevant
and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but their vulnerable selves . . .
to enter into a deeper solidarity
with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success
and to bring the light of Jesus there.¹*

I have no doubt that Nouwen's reflections
were influenced by his time living with a L'Arche community in France.
L'Arche's work is to form communities of people
who both have and don't have intellectual disabilities
for the purposes of living, working, praying, and playing together.

Think about it.

At L'Arche, Nouwen's typical ways to impress others were stripped away --
his intellect, his eloquence, his success, his reputation that preceded him.
All of these things might even have been barriers to his work with L'Arche.
Perhaps that is why he frames relevancy
not as something to chase but as a temptation to avoid.

Of course, we all want to be relevant.

We want our church to be relevant.

We want to have an impact, to make a difference.

And yet, I think our Christian journey can be described as a long walk to irrelevance.

It's to irrelevance, at least in the way the world tends to define success and power.

And it's a long walk – because it has to be done with discipline, daily.

To follow Christ is to walk down an escalator that is carrying us, pushing us, urging us,
to get to the top, a place of power over others.

Mark, chapter 9 includes a story of when
Jesus and his disciples were passing through Galilee.
Beginning with verse 30:

*[Jesus] did not want anyone to know where they were,
because he was teaching his disciples.
He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.*

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1989, 35.

*They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”
But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*

*They came to Capernaum.
When he was in the house, he asked them,
“What were you arguing about on the road?”
But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said,
“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*

*He took a little child whom he placed among them.
Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,
“Whoever welcomes one of these little children
in my name welcomes me;
and whoever welcomes me
does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:30-37, NRSV)*

We like to romanticize this scene because we like to romanticize what childhood is.
But in the first-century Greco-Roman world,
children were the most vulnerable members of society.

Infant mortality rates were high.

Disease and early deaths were common.

Fewer than half of all children would make it to adulthood.

Many women died during or after childbirth.

Maybe as a result, children were insignificant, invisible, not fully counted,
at least until they became adults.

Children were valued mostly for what they could become, not for what they were.

Yet, Jesus points to a child – a little child, the most vulnerable,
the most insignificant of all in that culture at that time --
and he holds this child as an example to his disciples of how they must become
in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And he goes on to say that caring for children,
among the lowliest of jobs in that day, was a way to welcome himself.

As an aside, I find it ironic that a lot of our history had men preaching,
while women cared for the children.

Believe me, I’m glad we’re past those days.

The church has suffered greatly for that position.

But think about it.

I mean, if the church wanted to maintain strict gender roles and say that men are
the best equipped to teach the good news of Jesus,
they are the ones that should have been spending the most time with the children.

The world encourages us to be overachievers, upwardly mobile,
always striving for more responsibility, more power, more respect, and more authority.
And once we get all that,
we are encouraged to use it, wield it, leverage it
to advance ourselves even more.

We are constantly tempted to choose power over love,
to choose control over the cross,
to choose being a leader without a willingness to be led.²

Echoing Jesus, James tells us that this is the wisdom that the world teaches,
and it results in disorder and wickedness, in chaos and strife, disputes and conflict.
It results in war.

*Who is wise and understanding among you?
Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom . . .
[T]he wisdom from above is first pure,
then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.
“God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.”*

It is not wrong to want to be special
or to have great worth and value.
Everyone has a longing for love, to be loved, to give love, to share love.
That’s part of what it means to be created in God’s image.
This ache and desire to be valued, to be loved,
echoes through all of our existence.
The question is, where will it take us?

The extent to which our sense of being, of worth, is tied up
with our comparisons to others, for good or bad,
is the same extent that we are placing value on other people
based on how they compare to us.

I don’t know who especially needs to hear this today,
but all of us need reminded of it from time to time.
Your value is not determined by you or anyone else.
Your value has already been determined by the God who created you in God’s own image,
and it is reflected in Christ Jesus,
the One would rather die than to see you perish.
You have unsurpassable worth.
You have unsurpassable worth.
You have unsurpassable worth . . .
and the same is true for your neighbor, your irritating co-worker,

² Ibid., 77-79.

your close-minded uncle, the incarcerated in prisons and immigration detention centers,
your enemy, and our country's enemies.

The apostle Paul, in prison, in chains, as far away as you could be from
holding worldly power
wrote these words to an anxious church:

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ,
if any comfort from his love,
if any common sharing in the Spirit,
if any tenderness and compassion,
then make my joy complete by being like-minded,
having the same love,
being one in spirit and of one mind.
Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.
Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,
not looking to your own interests
but each of you to the interests of the others.*

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11, NIV)*

So be it.