

Jesus said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

Being recognized is a deep human need. Being recognized is when a person is accepted and appreciated for who they are. People can be recognized for all kinds of different things: “You are talented.” “You are hard working.” “You are funny.” It feels good to be recognized. Usually people cultivate their lives in such a way that they can continue to be recognized. Funny people enjoy being recognized as funny, and so they are always coming up with new bits. What do you want to be known as? Smart, successful, caring, hard-nosed, charming? You’ll do what’s necessary to continue to be known and recognized as such.

This is simply how we are. There would be no sense in trying to get rid of this impulse. We need to be accepted and appreciated. To try to do away with this would be as silly as trying to do away with sleeping, eating, or drinking. That said, the desire to be recognized can go awry.

For example, what often happens is that a person not only wants to be recognized, he or she doesn’t want others to be recognized. Let’s say a woman is pretty. Maybe she’d like to be the prettiest. That means she’d like it if nobody was even close to being as pretty as her. Or let’s say there are many children in the family. Which of them is the favorite? There can only be one favorite. To be the child that mom or dad loves most feels good. I think you can see where problems arise. Being the prettiest can bring about meanness and conceit. With favorites in families there can be lifelong resentment. It’s not hard to see how these things can be bad.

What is to be done? I think a lot of people believe nothing can be done. We have no other choice than to accept things as they are. The best will be the best and the worst will be the worst. Since that is the way things are, you should try your hardest to be the best. Then you’ll get that recognition you crave. If someone is not getting recognition, then it’s because they aren’t trying hard enough. If they tried harder, then they’d be recognized too.

This is a very powerful philosophy. It makes sense. It’s assumed to be correct. It’s everywhere. To learn something different, therefore, will require effort. You’ll have to learn new and different rules. Take Jesus’s statement in our Gospel reading. He said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” To be first be last. It almost sounds non-sensical. Those are opposites of one another. If the first are last, then they can’t be first. The first are first and the last are last.

But Jesus helps us with what he says after that. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” Being the servant of all throws a different light on things. It shows us a different way that we might use what has been given to us. What comes naturally to us is to use whatever we have to promote ourselves. We try to make the case that we are the greatest. But if we would serve, then we would use what we have for others—to lift them up, to do them good.

Consider something I’ve already mentioned—prettiness. It can seem to be something that is only good for the girl who has it, but it doesn’t have to be used that way. A pretty girl can give her prettiness to her man. She wants him to enjoy her prettiness instead enjoying her prettiness for herself or using her prettiness to distinguish herself from others. Or a pretty girl can love the girls who have not been given

what she has been given. She can forget about her prettiness and associate with the lowly—not in some ostentatious, obnoxious, ugly way, but in a genuine, friendly way. Thereby she gives away her prettiness to those who are less so, and who might be somewhat shunned because of it.

Boys can do this too. Boys often value different things than girls. Athletic boys can hang out with non-athletic boys—bearing with them, not ridiculing them and demeaning them. Boys who know how to use guns or tools or other desirable things can take in those who don't. In this way a boy gives cover to another.

You know how it usually goes, though, don't you? A hierarchy is what comes naturally. The best are at the top. The worst are at the bottom. Those at the top differentiate themselves from the rest with their greatness. They are not like them. They are best. The rest are not. Those at the bottom should know their place and burn with envy. That's the way it is—so so many say.

That's not correct if Jesus is correct. Maybe Jesus is a fool. Lots of people don't believe him. But he says that greatness is not when you use what you have for yourself. Greatness is when you are **the last of all and the servant of all**. Greatness is when you lift up others, when you help and improve others. The lowlier the people you can help, the better, because when you are helping really lowly people you are being like Jesus.

Think of the way that Jesus is. If ever there was anyone who is the best, then that would be Jesus. But how does Jesus use his greatness? Does he point at disappointing people and say, "Look at how much better I am than you!" "Look how sinful you are and how righteous I am!"

No. Jesus doesn't do this. He could if he wanted. He truly is so much better and so much more righteous than we are. But he doesn't use what is his to stare at himself in the mirror, admiring himself, comparing himself to those who do not have what he has. He uses what is his to help those who are without. He makes others better.

And there's no one who's too low for him. There's no one about whom he says, "Ach! That one is too disgusting!" He rejects no one. The rejection is always on the other end. The sinner says he doesn't want to associate with him. The proud one says, "I won't have your condescension and charity!" But as far as Jesus is concerned, he is willing to be last of all. He is the servant of all. The word "**all**" means without exception. He will help you.

You can see how Jesus's friendliness, Jesus's reaching out, Jesus's free acknowledgement, acceptance, and approval of people is beautiful, helpful, and good. Another word that we could use to describe all this activity of Jesus is "love." Jesus loves us, therefore we should love others. The apostle John has written, "**We love, because he first loved us.**"

There are a lot of people who want to be recognized. They are aching for it. You can give them that. Now I'm sure you could come up with excuses for why you shouldn't. I'm sure that if you used your eagle-eye glasses for fault-finding, you could find faults in anyone. Thank God Jesus didn't do that to

you. If Jesus were looking for faults in you, so as to excuse himself from help you, I'm sure he could have. But he didn't. He loves you, so you should love others.

And, as I mentioned before, the lowlier the person, the better. The more like Christ you will be. So love that person whom you have found to be distasteful. Love that person from whom you will get no benefit in return. Jesus says that we should love even our enemies.

Jesus's saying is a strange recipe for greatness: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." You might be saying to yourself, "That won't make me happy. That will make me miserable." Don't be so sure. Loving and being loved are the highest things in life. The more you love the more you're loved. There's no limit to how much you can love. Jesus says that he can become the water of life in us so that we become like a spring. A spring of water just keeps going and going. Life and love bubble up even unto eternal life.

To do the opposite of this cannot turn out well. This is an important warning. People think it is neither here nor there if they are as vain and conceited as peacocks. Not so! James warned us in our Epistle reading that jealousy and selfish ambition are demonic. Demons hate and hamper and destroy life. So do the proud and cruel self-promoters. Hell, because it is the opposite of heaven, would seem to me to be the place where there is no love—a truly terrifying possibility. No love!

You know how good love is, so don't shut yourself up away from it. Do not strive to be the greatest by comparing yourself. Greatness is when you use what has been given to you to make other people better. Greatness is being like Jesus. Love like him. Be the last of all and the servant of all.