

He Must Increase, We Must Decrease

PRAY.

“Me first, me first,” the little boy said.
You’re just in the way, got too much to say,
I’m not being seen, I’m not being heard;
“Me first, me first,” the little boy said.

“Me first, me first,” the teenager said.
He cut off the car that was slowing him down,
He chewed out the driver that was making him frown;
“Me first, me first,” the teenager said.

“Me first, me first,” demanded the young man.
So, it’s our third date, don’t want to wait,
If you tell me “no,” I’ll have to go;
“Me first, me first,” demanded the young man.

“Me first, me first,” her daddy protested.
You can just wait ‘til I’ve got some time,
Got things more important, now on my mind.
“Me first, me first,” her daddy protested.

“Me first, me first,” shrieked the old man in line.
Then suddenly..., suddenly he *was* at the head of the line.
His mouth gaped at the Ancient of Days,
Who pointed to his Son filling the world and heaven’s stage.
“No, no, *He* is first; *He* *always* has been.
While you thought much of yourself..., so little of Him,
A tip of the hat, a token of faith
While you gained the glory and attention of men.
Your talents and your home, your accomplishments too,
Your grades and your wit were all about you.
Who could see my Son veiled by your pride?
Now He’s no longer hidden, his glory denied.
All men will worship, and to Him, bow their knees.
He’s no longer *decreasing*, while his *people*, *increase*.

When John the Baptizer preached, people followed him by the masses. Then Jesus appeared on the scene. And when some of John’s followers began to follow Jesus. Others questioned John about the apparent competition. John replied, “He must increase, I must decrease” (Jn.3:26-30). John got it.

This morning I want us to ponder the importance of steering people away from ourselves to God. Are we trying to draw others into *our* orbit, or into *God's*? This is especially important regarding our ministries, our service in the church, but I don't want to limit the application to that. As we think about this text, think about ways in your life in which you can draw attention away from yourself, and to Jesus Christ.

Turn to Acts 14:8-18. In the ongoing saga of Paul's first missionary trip, he and Barnabas found out how easy it would be to steal the attention and glory of men, away from Christ. READ.

Story

Opposition in Iconium forced Paul and Barnabas to pack and walk 20 miles down the road to the small country town of Lystra (Galatia then, Turkey now). Lystra was as different from Iconium as Kinzers is from New York City. Many residents were hill-tribes people called Anatolians who spoke a Lyconian dialect. Except for borrowing Greek religion, the culture was indigenous. Because there were few Jews and no synagogue, the apostles preached on street corners.

A disabled man was in the crowd, perhaps he'd been carried by friends and placed near the front. Repeating the nature of the man's disability in 3 ways, Luke seems determined to emphasize to readers that this was more than a temporary stomachache or some inorganic malady. In his whole life, he'd never been able to walk. If he were healed, the miracle could not easily be dismissed.

Watching him as he preached, Paul recognize that the man had faith. Stopping in the middle of his sermon he ordered the man "Stand up on your feet!" which he did instantly. Did you notice that Paul didn't say a certain phrase, or use certain words? Just ordered him to "Stand up!" Sometimes it's said that miracles or expelling of demons must be done just a certain way ("In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you..."). But spiritual power is not magic (power lies with words). Spiritual power lies with God, and it is transferred to a person not because the person uses the right phrase, but because he/she has a relationship with God, and demonstrates faith. READ Acts 19:13-16.

Spiritual power to expel demons, to help a friend get from despair to hope, to persuade people to come to Christ, to dissuade people from sin, or to heal someone, is the result of a relationship with God, and faith. Same with Paul on this day.

In a small town where everyone knows everyone else the people's reaction to this genuine miracle was understandable. You know in a crowd of 6,000 strangers, who can know for sure if the paralyzed man just healed was actually paralyzed to begin with? But this crowd knew; because they knew him.

Stunned to see him walking, they shouted, "The gods have come down to us!" Paul and Barnabas didn't know the native language so at first, they didn't realize what effect the miracle had had on the people.

They meant it to point to Jesus Christ, but a local legend told of a previous visit by Zeus and Hermes. The two gods disguised themselves as mortals and visited homes around Lystra. 1000 turned them away before an impoverished couple (Philemon & Baucis) welcomed the gods and shared their meager rations. As a reward, the gods turned their reed and wood hut into a glorious temple, and made them priest and priestess. But those who had turned them away, were swept away by a surprise flood.

These citizens were not going to be caught sleeping again. They sent for the priest who soon appeared with oxen in tow for a sacrifice, and wreaths for the two men.

At some point the apostles understood what was happening and were appalled.

“No, no, we are men just like you; created human beings just like you. This is precisely the kind of folly we are urging you to give up: superstition and other worthless things. We came to introduce you to the good news, sent to you by the God who made heaven, earth and the sea, and everything in them. In the past he has shown you his kindness by giving you rain, crops, adequate food, and happiness. Now it’s time for you to respond to the message of the good news.”

The crowd hesitated, but even so it was all the apostles could do to keep the people from burning oxen as worship. Paul and Barnabas tried to make sure people looked beyond them to Christ. So did John the baptizer. Throughout the ages, godly men and women have deflected praise and attention away from themselves, and toward God.

READ Acts 10:26, Rev.19:10.

Pastor, preacher, SS teacher, youth worker, children’s worker, parent, it can be a great challenge, yet it is *vital* that we point people—Christian and nonChristian alike—toward Jesus Christ. He must increase, we must decrease.

Concl:

What about you? Me? Do we compete with Christ? Is it me first, or Him first? This is a message for us pastors to hear over and over. What an awful thing to preach Christ over and over, while longing most to have the people listening be impressed by our exegesis, rhetorical skill, or teaching. He must increase, we must decrease. READ Lk.10:17. It’s not about us; it’s about Him.

Beyond the attention over your ministry gifts, do you crave others looking at you, admiring you, being impressed with your wisdom, your skill, the exercise of your talents, your beauty, your accomplishments, your intelligence..., you fill in the blank? If you could lasso the attention of strangers and friends alike, would you be inclined to pull them toward you, or drag them off to Jesus? Let’s take stock; is it about me, or about Jesus? Forget the wreaths, forget the oxen, what’s going on in our hearts?