

What Will Be the Harvest? By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 16060924
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8, Mark 9:30-37
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Don't you get exasperated with those disciples? They were such blockheads. They followed Jesus around the countryside for a couple of years. They heard his teaching, but they just didn't understand. Jesus told them that he was going to be arrested and crucified. How did they respond? They began arguing with themselves about who among them was the greatest! Can you fathom that?

A mother draws her adult children around her and informs them that she has cancer and has just a few months to live, and the kids start arguing about who gets which pieces of jewelry, or of which of them mom is most proud.

This or something similar to this happened three times in three consecutive chapters of the gospel of Mark. In 8:31, just after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus told them he was going to suffer and be rejected and killed, Peter scolded Jesus for thinking such a thing— that the messiah would suffer and die. In 10:35, after Jesus said a third time that he was going to suffer and die, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward and asked Jesus if they could sit, one on each side of him in his glory in heaven.

This question reflected a way of the world which Jesus was trying to change. It reflected what the author of James called “earthly, unspiritual, and devilish!”¹ This exchange between Jesus and the disciples is beautiful. Whereas it reflects the disciples' denseness, it also reflects Jesus' patience. He was such a wonderful teacher. That is why the disciples were just that, disciples: learners.

We are called to be disciples: learners at the feet of a wonderful patient teacher, and we still have a lot to learn. We cannot follow Jesus to gain glory for ourselves either here or in an afterlife. That would reflect selfish ambition. I bristle when I hear preachers preach a gospel of success and wealth: “Follow Jesus, and you'll be rich— you'll be successful— and you'll have lots of friends— girlfriends, or boyfriends.” That's worldly claptrap, and it's not what Jesus taught.

The wonderful teacher said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”² Then, he took a child into his arms and said, “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me”

These were not the teachings of society then, nor are they now. In Jesus' day, children had little status. Because of illness and accidents, fewer than half of children born lived to the age of six. One was not a full person worthy of respect until they reached the age of maturity. Jesus was redefining greatness.

There is a term used to refer to a social class of people, and it's often used pejoratively. It's “dirt farmer.” The word humility is derived from “humus” or dirt. The association suggests pejorative connotations, as when a person speaks of “those humble folk” but really means that they are worth little more than dirt under one's feet. Jesus, however, identified humility as necessary for true worth.

¹James 3:15

²Mark 9:35

The greatest among us must be last of all and servant of all. Humus is not just dirt, but fecund, fertile, productive dirt within which a seed is nourished. We just planted a dogwood tree in our back yard. We put humus in the hole and around the little trunk, knowing that this rich soil will help nourish that baby tree.

In our humility, the seeds of God's kingdom can be nourished and grow into a full harvest. We are called to be dirt farmers: planting seeds, scratching in the dirt, and reaping harvests. Many of you have planted gardens. You've taken seed packets and put them in peat pots, or you've bought tomato seedlings and planted them in soil. Or you've placed tulip or iris bulbs in the dirt in front of your window. Then, you keep the garden weeded. You water it, especially in hot dry weather such as we've had this summer. You wait patiently. Finally, you reap a harvest: juicy tomatoes; beans; or colorful flowers that might become centerpieces on a dinner table.

What we can be sure of, though, is that we harvest what we sow. If you plant corn, you'll get corn, not tulips. If you plant marigolds, you'll get marigolds, not mango trees.

The epistle of James described two kinds of harvest. One is the harvest of disorder and wickedness which comes from the seeds of envy and selfish ambition. The other is "a harvest of righteousness." It's the harvest that comes from the seed of God's wisdom. It is purity, peace, gentleness, and mercy.

If we envy our neighbor's spouse, if we envy our co-workers' car, we will lust after that which does not belong to us, and we will certainly cause heartache: either our own, or in those around us. If our ambition is only for our personal success, or if we are ambitious for financial wealth or power, we will help produce a cold and heartless world around us. I don't think envy and selfish ambition lead to personal happiness.

We are called to be dirt farmers here in Elon Community Church. We are called to plant and nourish this building, so it can remain standing in this community as a symbol of God's work in the world—so it can be used as a place where all of God's people are welcome to come and worship.

We are called to plant the seeds of caring outreach through Loaves and Fishes and the Allied Churches shelter. We are called to plant the seeds of Christian faith in our children so they can continue living and speaking God's word long after we're gone.

As we enter our fall stewardship campaign, "Spotlight on Stewardship," I'm going to be very interested in seeing what kinds of seeds we plant. I suggest that you each plant three seeds: time; talent; and money.

The first is a seed of time. Choose an outreach project such as the Women's Shelter or tutoring in a school, and spend some time changing lives. Or, choose a committee or task force in the church such as one of the Vision goals.

The second is a seed of talent. If you like to sing, join the choir or some other singing group. If you can paint or hammer, check with the Trustees. You get the idea.

The third is a seed of money. Consider what proportion of your income you will give to God's work in the world. Five percent can go to this congregation and five percent can go to charities of your choosing that you think are helping produce a harvest of peace, healing, or justice.

We are called to be dirt farmers: humble followers of the patient teacher—while he watches, what will be the harvest?