

Some Words About...

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Megalunein (exalt)

The Greek word megalunein meant to exalt or hold in high esteem. It occurs frequently in the Septuagint (e.g., 1 Samuel 26:24).

New Testament Use

In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus first affirms the temporal authority of the scribes and Pharisees (1-3) and then denies that they have any spiritual authority (3b-9). Their conduct indicates their lack of spirituality. Their whole approach is to impress others. For example, “They make much of their amulets and they exalt the tassels of their clothes” (23:5).

The amulets were a representation of the command to keep the Torah present in their lives (Deuteronomy 11:18 and elsewhere). The tassels were a sign that the wearer kept even the smallest of the laws (Deuteronomy 22:12). Jesus’ dismissing of the proud show of religiosity was a clearing away of nonessentials and a preliminary response to expressing the important aspects of one’s relationship with God which are presented in verses 8-12. Humility before God is to be part of one’s humility to other people.

Luke 1:47, “My soul exalts the Lord,” expresses Mary’s attitude toward God and verses 48-55 specify some of the elements in that exalting.

In Luke 1:58, however, Elizabeth’s “neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had exalted his mercy to her and they rejoiced with her.” They would, of course, be more impressed with Elizabeth’s bearing a son at her age than at Mary’s having a son.

Acts 5:12-13 says that all the apostles were gathered in Solomon’s Portico and “the common people exalted them” (5:13), but the rest avoided them. Solomon’s Portico was a verandah, or porch, at the eastern end of the temple. Jesus walked there in the winter (John 10:23). Peter healed a lame man, and people in Solomon’s Portico were amazed (Acts 3:11). And here all the apostles gathered to the delight of the common people. Josephus insists that the structure dated back to Solomon himself. He should know, but scholars generally reject the claim. The importance of Christians acting as Christians among the people in general has continued through the centuries. Missionaries healing, teaching, and living among people of all nations are the modern equivalent.

Acts 10:1-11:1 marks a turning point in the ministry of Peter. Six Jewish friends from Joppa accompanied him to Caesarea and there witnessed a Roman soldier and his Gentile friends “speaking in languages and exalting God” (10:46). The Gentiles were baptized, and word spread that Gentiles had received the word of the Lord (11:1).

Acts 19:13-20 might be used as a text for a sermon titled “Cashing in on Christianity.” The seven sons of Sceva were not doubters; they were opportunists. They knew a good thing when they saw it. And they saw faith in action — Paul’s faith and the faith of those whom he healed. They believed their eyes. But there is a difference between belief and faith. Their belief that God could be manipulated by the outward form of Christianity had an almost comic result. Their attempt to use Paul’s formula backfired, and the evil spirit they were trying to exorcise said “I know Jesus and I know Paul, but who are you?” The spirit beat them up. But “the name of the Lord Jesus was exalted” (19:17).

2 Corinthians 10:7-18 is the introduction to Paul's attack on certain people who bragged of their own success and who belittled Paul, saying that he boasted too much of his work. Because Paul's authority was specifically among the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; Romans 11:13; 15:16; Galatians 1:16), it is possible that Christianity was more successful among the Corinthian Jews than among the Gentiles and that this lay behind the boasting. In 2 Corinthians 10:15 Paul expresses to his friends the hope that increasing faith "among you will exalt our authority greatly."

In Philippians 1:20 Paul says that he expects and hopes "in all confidence that as always, so now, Christ shall be exalted in my body whether through life or through death." These are the words of a man living in a society where sensuality was indulged with abandon by some, and natural impulses were diabolically crushed by others. Paul here is not an ascetic scorning life and seeking death, nor is he a hedonist bent on living life to the fullest. Neither life nor death absorbs his attention. What he wants is that Christ might be lifted up for all to see and worship.

Today

The question is What do we exalt? We could give a long list of things that the world holds up for adoration. But what do we as Christians exalt? The church? The individual? The budget? Programs? Causes? Our amulets and tassels? The Incarnation permits us to invest many things with holy significance. But the crucifixion destroys the possibility that such things are intended in and of themselves to be important. It is the resurrected Christ who says "All authority in heaven and on earth are given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

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