

**“Greater Works Than Jesus”**  
**John 14:12-14**  
**July 26, 2020**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**THE READING OF THE WORD:**

We return again this morning to the Gospel of John, chapter fourteen.

Jesus has just spoken to the disciples of his unity with God the Father, and how those who know him know the Father. And from there he urges them to believe on account of the works that the Father has done through him.

Which brings us to the words of Jesus in verses twelve through fourteen.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

<sup>14:12</sup> [Jesus said to them:] “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:**

We praise you, Lord,  
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.  
Help us to take your Word into our hearts and onto our lips.  
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.  
Help us to meditate on your precepts,  
and to fix our eyes on your ways,  
Grant us to delight in your truth,  
and to never forget your Word.  
In Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

**INTRODUCTION:**

We come to a challenging text this morning. Even Augustine begins his sermon on this text by saying so. [Tractate LXXII.1]

The text immediately raises incredulity for many of us. Some hear texts like this and it seems clear to them that the promise here is just obviously false. Others feel a sense of anxiety and a desire to explain away what Jesus promises here.

Both responses, though, I think, are mistaken.

This morning, I want to make the case that if we properly understand Jesus's words here, *in context*, then we can see not only that they are believable, but that they are demonstrably true, and they have implications for our lives and our callings.

To do that, we need to ask four questions:

First, what does Jesus promise in verse twelve?

Second, is it true?

Third, why is it true?

And fourth, what does it mean for us?

So:

What does Jesus promise in verse twelve?

Is it true?

Why is it true?

And what does it mean for us?

### **WHAT DOES JESUS PROMISE IN VERSE 12?:**

So the first question is: What does Jesus promise in verse twelve?

And to answer that we need to start by asking: Who is the promise made to?

And Jesus tells us right there in verse twelve. He says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do."

The promise is made to whoever believes in Jesus.

Now, with a phrase like that Jesus is not talking about merely formal, nominal, or external believers. What Jesus is speaking of is someone who has made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ – who has placed their trust in Jesus and embraced him from the heart. That's important to recognize. [Morris, 645]

But, at the same time, the expansiveness of who this promise is made to also needs to be appreciated. It is not limited to the apostles. It is not limited to the super-believers. It is not limited to the spiritual elite. But anyone who has true faith in Jesus is included – "whoever believes in me," Jesus says.

That's who the promise is made to.

What is it then, that is actually promised?

Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do."

Jesus promises that whoever believes in him will do greater works than he – than Jesus – has done.

Which leads us to ask: What kind of works is Jesus talking about?

And this is one of those texts where our default response can be to take the verses by themselves, and import what *we* think the words should mean, and draw conclusions from that.

So if we decide that “works” just means miracles, that means that, if we believe enough in Jesus, then we can perform whatever miracles he did. If we interpret verse twelve like that then we will respond either with naivete or cynicism. We will either cynically shrug and say, “Well obviously that’s not true, so Jesus here is wrong.” Or we will try to go for a walk across Puget Sound and end up confused and wet.

But both responses would be rooted in reading our own meaning into the word “works” instead of asking what the word means in context.

What then, does the word mean in context? Well, let’s read the context to find out.

Let’s hear from verses ten through twelve – the two verses beforehand and then the verse itself:

Jesus said to them: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.”

The word “works” is used in each verse, and it’s the same word in Greek each time. And the way Jesus uses it the first two times tells us how to read it in verse twelve.

First, in verse ten, Jesus uses the word “works” to describe his words as the works of the Father. He says: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” He describes his words as works of the Father – but that’s not all. He describes his words as works of the Father that should lead to belief – to faith – within the hearts of other people. He starts with the question: “Do you not believe ... ?”

So, in verse ten Jesus speaks of “works” of the Father in the words of Jesus that should lead to belief within other people.

The second use comes in verse eleven. There Jesus urges the disciples to believe “on account of the works themselves.” And here Jesus seems to be referring to his own works – to the deeds and the signs that he has done. And once more he frames them as works that should lead to belief within other people.

And so, in verses ten and eleven, Jesus uses the word “works” to describe his words and deeds that should lead to belief within other people.

And when he uses the word “works” again in verse twelve, if we are going to be good readers and cooperate with Jesus as a speaker, then we should assume that unless he indicates otherwise, he is using the same word in the same way once again.

Which would mean that in verse twelve Jesus is referring to words and deeds that cause others to believe – words and deeds that bring others to faith in, to conversion towards, to discipleship to, Jesus Christ. [Morris, 646]

So, what does Jesus promise in verse twelve?

Jesus promises that the church – that those who believe in him – will do greater works of bringing others to faith – greater works of making disciples – than Jesus himself did in his ministry.

That may not be the same as a promise that we can go for a walk on the water of Puget Sound. But it is still a startling claim.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of all, is saying that his followers, that we – that you and I – will do greater works of disciple-making than he himself did.

That’s the promise. And if we take it seriously, it sounds a little insane.

Which brings us to our second question ...

### **IS IT TRUE?:**

Is it true?

Is Jesus’s promise true?

And the answer is that it doesn’t seem like it should be true ... and yet it indisputably is.

First, it doesn’t seem like it should be true.

Jesus is the perfect Son of God.

And who did he recruit for this work, and say that they would do greater works than he did?

As Michael Green puts it: “It was a small group of eleven men whom Jesus commissioned to carry on his work, and bring the gospel to the whole world. They were not distinguished; they were not educated; they had no influential backers. In their own nation they were nobodies and, in any case, their own nation was a mere second-class province on the eastern extremity of the Roman map. If they had stopped to weigh up the probabilities of succeeding in their mission, even granting their conviction that Jesus was alive and that his Spirit went with them to equip them for their task, their hearts must surely have sunk, so heavily were the odds weighed against them. How could they possibly succeed?”

Then Green adds: “And yet they did.” [Green, 29]

And they succeeded – they made disciples – in a way that almost immediately surpassed the disciple-making works of Jesus.

In Acts 1:1 we are told that after three years of Jesus’s ministry, there were 120 men and women who were gathered together as his disciples in Jerusalem – who believed in him. Then came Pentecost. The apostles preached to the people in Jerusalem, and that day 5,000 people came to faith, believing in Jesus and becoming his disciples. In terms of works that yield the fruit of disciple-making, it would seem that the apostles, in one day, surpassed the works of Jesus over three years. [Morris, 646; Augustine, *Tractate LXXI.3, Tractate LXXII.1*]

And of course Pentecost was only the beginning. While Jesus’s ministry was restricted to a relatively small section of ancient Palestine, in the weeks, and months, and years that followed, believers in the early church increased in number and in geographical reach. [Morris, 646]

And that continued well beyond the apostles and the apostolic age. [Augustine, *Tractate LXXI.3*]

Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates that the early church grew at a rate of 40% per decade, bringing it from a few thousand believers in the first century to a few million believers by the end of the third century. [Stark, 6]

And much of this work of making new disciples was not carried out by the well-known apologists of the ancient church, but by ordinary Christians sharing the gospel and making disciples of others. [Green, 242-249, 380-381]

And those works continued beyond the early church, up until today. And the fruit of those great works is right before our eyes now.

Church historian Mark Noll describes this in his book *The New Shape of World Christianity*.

First, in terms of overall numbers, Noll puts it like this – he says: “More than half of all Christian adherents in the whole of the history of the church have been alive in the last one hundred years.” And “Close to half of Christian believers who have ever lived are alive right now.” [Noll, 21]

Now stop and think about that. “Close to half of Christian believers who have ever lived are alive right now.” That means that if Jesus came back right now, and raised all the dead and gathered all of his people to himself, then it is likely that the largest period of history represented – the period of history that would boast the most Christians – would not be from some past golden age, but it would be from right now. From today.

And the expansion since the ministry of Jesus is not only reflected in raw numbers, but also in geographical reach. Those who believe in Jesus have made disciples far beyond Jesus’s region of Palestine or even Paul’s ambitions for Rome.

Noll gives a series of examples. Let me share a few. He writes:

“This past Sunday it is possible that more Christian believers attended church in China than in all of so-called ‘Christian Europe.’”

“This past Sunday more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined – and the number of Anglicans in church in Nigeria was several times the number in those other African countries.”

“This past Sunday more Presbyterians were at church in Ghana than in Scotland, and more were in congregations of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa than in the United States.”

“This past Sunday more people attended the Yoido Full Gospel Church [...] in Seoul, Korea, than attended all the churches [combined] in [...] [the entire denomination of] the Presbyterian Church in America.”[Noll, 20-21]

The gospel spread far and wide.

Is Jesus’s promise in verse twelve true?

Yes. It is demonstrably true that those who believe in Jesus have done greater works of disciple-making than Jesus himself did.

Which leads to our third question ...

### **WHY IS IT TRUE?:**

Why is this true?

Why is this true?

It doesn’t seem like it should be.

Well, Jesus tells us.

He will go on to say more about this in the verses that follow, but he gives his first answer here in verses twelve through fourteen.

And the heart of his answer is: “because I am going to the Father.”

“Because I am going to the Father.”

Jesus’s going to the Father means at least three things.

First, it means that he has completed and fully revealed his atoning work. [Morris 645]

By the time he goes to the Father, Jesus will have paid for the sins of his people on the cross, risen from the dead, and ascended to heaven. This work and revelation of Jesus will be preached by his disciples, and that clear preaching of the work of Christ will lead to more conversions, and so, greater works. That’s the first significant thing about Jesus going to the Father.

The second reason that Jesus's going to the Father will result in his disciples doing such great works is that when he goes to the Father, as the Father has worked through him, so he will work through his people.

Jesus spoke in verse ten of how the Father was at work through him. In the same way, Jesus will work through those who believe in him.

The Bible makes this point again and again. Jesus identifies with those who believe in him and works through them to do great works.

Nothing that the apostles or any Christians do for the kingdom of God was ever done by them alone. Christ's disciples act in reliance on Christ, and Christ works in and through his disciples. [Morris, 646; Augustine, *Tractate LXXI.3*; Carson, 495]

And so, as D.A. Carson puts it, the real contrast Jesus presents in verse twelve "is not [...] between Jesus' works and his disciples' works but between the works of Jesus that he himself performed during the days of his flesh, and the works that [Jesus] performed through his disciples after his death and exaltation." [Carson, 497]

That's a second reason why Jesus's going to the Father means that those who believe in him can do such great works.

The third reason is given in verses thirteen and fourteen. There Jesus says: "I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

Jesus goes to the Father, and when he is with the Father he will, from heaven, answer the prayers of his people. And *that* will enable them to do greater works.

As Augustine puts it: Jesus's going "to the Father, was not with any view of abandoning the needy, but of hearing and answering their petitions." [Augustine, *Tractate LXXIII.1*]

We might think of this as having some parallels to someone elected to congress. In their work to serve their district, they leave their district. But they leave their district in order to go to Washington D.C. – to the seat of federal power – and they do that in order to serve the district they left back home – to use their power in D.C. to meet the needs of the people back in their home district, so that those they leave behind will actually do greater works there than the congressman or congresswoman would have done if he or she had stayed in their home district and never gone to Washington in the first place.

Ascending to the Father, Jesus will hear the prayers of his people, and whatever is asked in his name he will grant, so that they are able to do even greater works of conversion and disciple-making than he did when he walked the earth. [Carson, 496-497]

Now, even as we say that, we need to take a moment to make sure we rightly understand what Jesus is promising in these verses too.

When Jesus says, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it,” even though he states no qualifications, any good listener – any good reader – must know that there are implied qualifications.

For example, no good listener or reader can suppose that Jesus means that if someone asks Jesus to let Satan win, and he adds the words “in Jesus’s name”, then Jesus is committing himself to granting that request.

Of course not. The reference to requests being made “in Jesus’s name” is not a magical formula Jesus is giving us or anyone else. [Carson, 497]

Instead, to ask something “in Jesus’s name” is to ask it for Jesus’s sake – for the sake of Jesus’s mission to save his people, for the sake of Jesus’s mission to restore his world, for the sake of Jesus’s goal of glorifying the Father. Jesus is not promising to grant what is contrary to his mission, because such requests would not really be in his name – because they would be inconsistent with who he is.

If we request something sinful ... or if we request something good for sinful reasons ... then Jesus is not promising to grant our request. For such requests are not rightly for his sake, or in his name.

Even if we request something good and we ask for it for good reasons ... if Jesus knows it would be something that would work against our salvation or the ultimate good of his people, then too he would not grant it. For “Savior” is part of who he is – part of his name. And he will not grant anything that is contrary to his role, his name, as Savior – whether the request comes from malintent, or from honest creaturely ignorance.

And none of that is a contradiction to what Jesus promises here. Jesus promises to hear our prayers, and to grant them so far as they are consistent with his name as Lord of this world, Savior of his people, and Son of God the Father. [Augustine, *Tractate LXXIII.1-3*; Wright 63-64]

So, first: What does Jesus promise in verse twelve? Jesus promises that the church – that those who believe in him – will do greater works of bringing others to faith – of making disciples – than Jesus himself did in his ministry.

Second: Is it true? Yes. We see it in the Bible, in history, and around us even now.

Third: Why is it true? It is true because Jesus goes to the Father, and so he has accomplished our salvation, he works through his people, and he answers our prayers.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US?:**

And that brings us to our last question: What does all this mean for us?

And here I want to quickly make four brief applications.

First, it means that we must make disciples of ourselves.



As Augustine points out, our starting point in this probably needs to be us. It is no small work for us to work out our own salvation, as we are called to in Philippians 2:12. That is a great work. And yet we often fail to think of it rightly. [*Tractate LXXII.3*]

We often either neglect this great work, or we act as if it depends completely on us ... which often leads to discouragement, which leads again to neglect.

Let me explain a little more of what I mean. There are all sorts of small things we can do to grow spiritually. With about twelve minutes a day, we can read the entire Bible each year. With five minutes a day we can add thirty hours to our prayer life each year. With small deeds of love and service we can show Christ's love and cultivate his virtues. These are all things we can do. And yet, so often we don't – at least not consistently.

And there's a range of reasons for that – spiritual and otherwise. But I would say that one of them is that we do not believe Jesus's promise here.

Growing in our faith is a great work. Growing in holiness, and knowledge of and love for God – that is a great work. And deep down, most of us don't believe that twelve minutes a day in the Scriptures or five minutes a day in prayer is going to accomplish much towards a work that is so great.

And on its own it wouldn't.

But Jesus has made a promise to do great works in and through those who trust him. And he can do more with those twelve minutes than you could with twelve hours. He has gone to the Father, he is seated as king of the universe, and he will do greater works in and through you than he did when he walked the earth. The question is whether you will believe him. The question is whether you will give him that bit of time, trusting that his promise is true.

That's the first thing we should do with this text: Trusting Jesus's promise, we should work to make disciples of ourselves.

The second thing we should do is to make disciples of others.

You might start by thinking of those closest to you – people like your family. And I won't go into details here, but the same principles apply in our families as apply with us individually. You'd be amazed what a little time, consistently dedicated to Jesus in faith, can do. The question again is whether we will trust him. Will we devote just a few minutes to a low-pressure spiritual discussion after dinner? Will we ask our child a spiritual question? Will we initiate five minutes of prayer with our spouse? Will we take up those simple words and deeds, trusting that by Jesus's power they will result in the great work of making disciples?

And will we do the same outside of our families? Will we seek to make disciples among our friends? Among our neighbors? Among our co-workers? Will we intentionally find ways, in word and deed, to take the risk of proclaiming Christ to those that God has put in our lives, trusting that Jesus will accomplish great works through our meager efforts?

And will we do the same beyond our circle of friends and acquaintances? Will we seek to make disciples of the nations, as Jesus calls us to? Will we look for ways to minister to those in need

locally, and to partner with missionaries globally, trusting that our small contribution can, with Jesus's aid, be used in a greater work?

The second thing we should do with this text is that, trusting in Jesus's promise, we should seek to make disciples of others.

The third thing this text calls us to, is that, trusting Jesus's promise, we should pray.

We are to pray for these great works of making disciples. That is what Jesus tells us so clearly in verses thirteen and fourteen.

And yet, how often do you pray for these things? How often do you pray for your own growth and perseverance in the faith? How often do you pray for the belief or discipleship of your family, or your friends, or your neighbors, or co-workers? How often do you pray for the expansion of Christ's kingdom here and around the world?

How often do you pray for those things on your own? How often do you join with other Christians to pray for such things? Wednesday night prayer meeting is a good place to start.

Jesus says of the Church's work of making disciples: "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

Let's not fail to take him up on that offer.

Trusting Jesus's promise, we are to make disciples of ourselves, to make disciples of others, and to pray for all these things.

Fourth, and finally, we are to trust in Jesus's promises and not lose heart.

As we've already noted, it's not just that Jesus says he *will* do great works through his feeble church, *it's that he already has*. So many great works have been done. So many have come to know the Lord. His kingdom keeps increasing. And he is not done yet.

And yet we often lose heart. It might be for a number of reasons. Sometimes we are so historically short-sighted that we cannot see the mighty works of faith that have been done to get us to where we are today. Sometimes we are so culturally myopic that we cannot see beyond the changes in our own country's spiritual state to see the great works happening around the world. Sometimes we cling to narratives of Christian failure – thinking that these pessimistic accounts of where the kingdom of God is and where it is going will lead others to action ... when far more often such stories are not only misleading, but lead more to apathy and abdication. [On the "Christian Failure Narrative" see: Stanton as well as Wright, et al. Links are provided below.]

Of course, our calling is not to a blind optimism. But our calling is to Christian realism. It is to see the challenges before us, but also to see the promises of Jesus and believe them.

And in this case that should be especially easy, as his promise to do greater works of conversion and discipleship is verified by hard data!

Christ has done great works through his Church in every age. He still is doing such works. And he will continue to do such works until he returns.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus, in our text this morning, makes an astounding promise.

It is not an idle promise.

It is a promise he has kept many, many times – too many times to count.

And now he makes it to you.

Take him up on it.

This morning Jesus says to you: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

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