



**GARVEY'S LESSONS OF LIFE AND WORK:  
BEING THE BEST OF OURSELVES**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The month of August easily brings to mind the Honorable Marcus Garvey who stands as a model and monument in this sacred narrative we name and know as African history. Certainly, his life and work offer abundant lessons for us in our ongoing efforts to understand and assert ourselves in the world in rightful and righteous ways. Garvey's philosophy and practical project begins with a series of questions rising out of the condition in which he sees Black people around the world. It is a condition of relative powerlessness and severe oppression. He concludes that it has to do with both the power and immorality of the oppressor and the lack of adequate self-knowledge and organization of African peoples. He thus says, "point to me a weak nation and I will show you a people oppressed, abused and taken advantage of by others." But "show me well-organized nation and I will show you a people and nation respected by the world." The challenge for him, then, is to determine how we, as a people, can stand up and go forth in the world as an organized, strong and respected people.

Garvey teaches that we must first simultaneously and seriously reaffirm our Africanness and derive both our purpose and direction from this identity. Thus, he maintains that "Man's first duty is to discover himself." To do this, Garvey says one must ask two initial questions, "Who am I here?" and "what is expected of me?" by my God and my people? To ask "who am I?" is to reaffirm our Africanness and thru this our humanity and our divine right to be free and to live a good, meaningful and dignity-affirming life. But to ask "Who am I here" is to ask the question of "what have I done and

what am I doing in this time and place to honor my historical identity and the burden of history this places on me?" This is clear from Garvey's second question: what is expected of me by my God and my people? And the answer is: the constant striving to be the best of ourselves and aid in remaking the world.

Here Garvey urges men and women to be committed to and ready for the demands of history and struggle. He asks, "Where can we find in this race of ours real men. Men of character, men of purpose, men of confidence, men of faith, men who really know themselves?" To organize Africans and redeem the world African community, he says we need to act with confidence, audacity and unbreakable will. Garvey argues that human will determines whether a person will be slave to others or sovereign of himself. He contends that if Africans recognized their rightful status and potential as bearers of dignity and divinity, and sought to realize the awesome power within them, within a brief period, an African people would come into being "resurrected not from the will of others to see us rise, but from our own determination to rise, irrespective of what the world thinks."

Thirdly, Garvey says we need men and women to join actively in the Pan-African project of redeeming Africa and building the world African community through political, economic and cultural self-determination. His "appeal is here made to every son and daughter of Africa, the scattered Africans and the Africans at home" on the continent. It is a project of struggle for liberation and remoulding ourselves in the process then and now. The question is "how many of us are living up to the dignity of human beings;"

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thinking deeply about our lives and future, and organizing and building a world that affirms and expands our humanity? It is *in* and *for* this Pan-African project that we must, as Africans and self-determining human beings, he says, "remould yourselves, remake yourselves, mentally and spiritually (and) place responsibility in your own two hands." For "You are responsible for what you are. You are responsible for what you want to be."

Garvey then asks where should we begin our work and what is it. He answers saying, "It is the duty of every man to find his place, to know his work, and I take it for granted that every man and woman of the (Black) race who knows himself or herself, can, if they make up their minds, find their racial place." Garvey says that our place is among our people, thinking critically, working and struggling hard, acting with dignity and determination, being creative. He also says, "You must realize that your function is to create, and if you think about it in the proper way you will find work to do." Nature, he tells us, is still to be studied, discovered and developed and "the problems of the world are still unsettled."

Also, Garvey teaches that our task is to prepare ourselves to serve and then begin to do so. Service for Garvey is always for the masses and the greater good. He cautions us against the immorality and destructiveness of selfishness and teaches the promise of

working for the collective good. He says, "the ends you serve that are selfish will take you no further than yourself, but the ends that are for all, in common will take you even into eternity." Garvey, then, wants us to find our place, serve our people and build for eternity so that we may, in turn, live for eternity.

Here Garvey talks about the function of education as the fundamental way by which a people builds its own unique culture and civilization and insures its progress in human history. He contends that "Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization, and the advancement and glory of their own race." Garvey also argues that education must reach and raise up the masses, for they are the core and essence of the nation, defining the external perception and the internal reality of the level of a people or society. Garvey's faith in his people is immense and uplifting. He believes if we can just reach inside ourselves and bring forth the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense, we can transform ourselves and remake the world. Thus, he counsels us saying, "Let us not try to be the best or worst of others, but let us make the effort to be the best of ourselves." For in this lies the motive force of our history and the sure flourishing of our humanity.

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