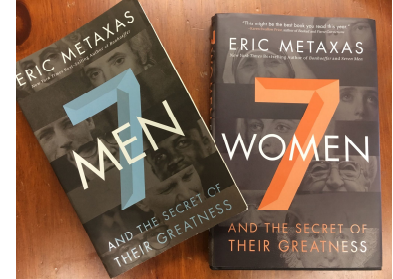


This morning we begin a new series of messages that I am really excited about. A year ago or so I came across a couple of books (**Picture here**) by Eric Metaxas called, *7 Men/7 Women, And the Secret of Their Greatness*. So, I've chosen three men and three women to look at, and see how their faith impacted their lives, and how they in turn shaped the world because of that faith. If you'd like to read more about these people, and the others as well, I encourage you to get a copy of each book. They're inspiring, well written, and completely worth your time.



So this morning we're beginning with a look at Jackie Robinson (**Picture**). As probably many of you know, Jackie Robinson is known for breaking down the so-called "color barrier" in Major League Baseball – African American baseball players were banned from MLB. He did this in the mid 1940's – before Rose Parks, before Martin Luther King, before any of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. In his honor, April 15<sup>th</sup> (yesterday) is not only tax day here in America, but more positively, it is Jackie Robinson Day when he is honored and remembered for his groundbreaking courage: every player on every MLB team wore 42 yesterday as their jersey number.



Jackie Robinson was born on January 31, 1919 in Cairo, Georgia. His mother was the daughter of a former slave. Shortly after, his father left the family, and his mother soon after that had saved enough money to move with her five children to Pasadena, CA. Jackie was a fantastic all-around athlete, lettering in four different sports in High School and at UCLA. But his older brother, Mack, showed even more athletic promise, running track for the USA in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. In fact, Mack won a silver medal in the 200-meter dash, finishing four-tenths of a second behind...Jesse Owens.

Jackie met his future wife, Rachel, while at UCLA. One of the things that drew them together was a strong Christian faith. Both had been raised in Christian homes, and Jackie's faith played a huge role in breaking the color barrier in baseball. After a stint in the military, he ended up playing professional baseball, starting in the spring of 1945, for the Kansas City Monarchs, a team that was part of the Negro League, which was the alternative to playing in the Major Leagues for black baseball players.

Unbeknownst to him, in New York City, the General Manager of Major League Baseball's Brooklyn Dodgers (before their move to Los Angeles) was beginning to look for how he could help break the color barrier in baseball. **Branch Rickey was the well-respected and innovative General Manager of the Dodgers who changed the game of baseball in several different ways.** Most importantly, Branch was a devout Christian – devoted to the point that he refused to play or attend baseball games on Sundays. (Imagine if that happened today...even at the Little League level!) And his faith led him to believe that segregation was an injustice that needed to be corrected, and that God had put him in his position to help make that happen.

But he knew it would be an uphill battle, and he'd have to do it carefully. A few of his staff were aware of the plans and sworn to secrecy. Through them he covertly scouted the Negro League teams, looking for a player who would be up to the task. Publically, he did this scouting under the guise of starting a new Negro League Team in Brooklyn. And obviously, this was long before the Internet when all kinds of information can be gotten covertly, without anyone knowing. Just a couple weeks ago I was reminded about how much info people can get online, when I got an email from Groupon that said, "Recommended deals for you." And the first thing recommended for me was the **iGrow Hair Regrowth System.** (Picture here, with product name under it).



What the heck? I've never searched for any kind of hair growth product online, in a store, or anywhere...never talked with anyone about it. I mean I guess I wouldn't mind having more hair...but I've never really thought about doing anything to change it. Does the internet read my thoughts now? By the

way, I don't know how well it works...I did not order one. 😊

Anyway, Branch Rickey had to go about this very stealthfully, with only a few key people even knowing. And he came across a young player with the Kansas City Monarchs named Jackie Robinson. When the two of them first met **(Picture here, a few years later from 1950)**, Jackie thought he was in New York to find out about this new Negro League team. When they first met they just looked at each other for several seconds without saying a word. Eventually, after exchanging pleasantries, Branch told him why he was really interested in him: that he believed Jackie was the man to break down the color barrier in professional baseball.



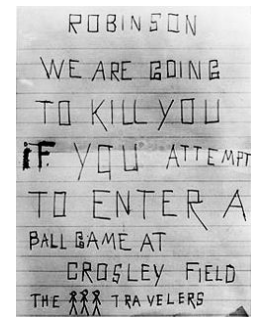
Jackie responded that he was sure he could play baseball at that level and also face up to whatever would come his way...that he wasn't afraid of anyone and had been in any number of fist fights over the years when anyone had challenged him. Rickey then responded to him in a way that no one would have expected. He said, **“I know you're a good ballplayer. What I don't know is if you have the guts. I'm looking for a ballplayer with the guts *not to fight back.*”**

– Branch Rickey to Jackie Robinson; (Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, p. 126, quoted by Eric Metaxas in *7 Men...*).

Because if there was even one negative reaction by Jackie toward an opponent, a hotel clerk, a waiter, a fan in the stands or on the street...if there was one reaction by him toward anyone even though they would be hurling all kinds of vulgar, despicable things, it would ruin their efforts, and set the integration of baseball back 10-15 years, and hamper the integration of the broader culture as well. He was going to have to lean on the resurrection power of Jesus to turn the other cheek, and to love and pray for his enemies.

Jackie felt he was up for the task. He played one season, in 1946, with the Dodgers' Minor League team, the Montreal Royals. He was the regular target of vicious name calling and more. But his on-field performance was stunning, and he led the minor leagues with a .349 batting average. And then

in the following season the Dodgers brought him up to the big league team, and his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers was on April 15, 1947 (70 years ago yesterday). **(Picture**



**here)** It was not an easy task, with death threats such as this one, name calling from opposing players, pitches intentionally thrown at his head (no batting helmets!), service refusal in restaurants, not being allowed at the team hotel...even on his own team, many of the teammates were uncertain that he belonged, at first. **Every night, he prayed for strength to endure.**

And by the end of the season he won the rookie of the year award; but more importantly, much like Jesus, he never once retaliated against those who opposed him. And soon, more black players were playing in Major League Baseball. In his third season he was on the NL All-Star Team (6 total) and also in that third season he was voted the National League's Most Valuable Player for the year. In 1951 and 1953, the Dodgers played in the World Series, but lost each time. In 1955, they won the World Series title. In 1957, at the age of 38, he retired. In 1962 he was voted into the Hall of Fame – the first black player to receive that honor. On October 24, 1972, as his wife, Rachel, was fixing breakfast in the kitchen, he ran from their bedroom, put his arms around her, told her he loved her, and he collapsed. He died of a heart attack in the ambulance on the way to the hospital at the age of 53.

Jackie Robinson was an amazing man and our world is changed for the better because of him, as well as Branch Rickey, and others like them. Our family (1 adopted, another in the works) would not be what it is without the efforts of people like them before us. And Jackie never could have walked that path without his Christian faith...without the trust that he had in Jesus, and without Jesus as the foundation of his life...without his daily ritual of prayer and asking God for the strength not to fight back. And he's a great testament to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. We're called to be Christ-like in our living – not Jackie Robinson-like – but let's admit it: sometimes that's intimidating because of who Jesus was. But someone like Jackie helps us to see that if they can be inspired by Jesus to live like that, maybe we can, too.

Now, it is true that there are a lot of things people will believe in and will

inspire them to do great things. And just because someone believes in a cause, is inspired by that cause, and lives an inspiring life for that cause does not mean that the cause is true. The cause might be right, and noble and just and all that. **But sometimes there's a difference between being right and being true.**

Nearly 2,000 years ago, 12 men, and many other men and women too, felt drawn to the cause of Jesus Christ and to follow him when Jesus invited them; not just because he was right, but because he was true. And when Jesus died, they stuck together, along with others who had followed Jesus as well, and things grew from there. They didn't disband, and they didn't abandon the cause, even though his death completely shattered their hopes and dreams for what they thought Jesus was doing and where he was leading them. But something happened. Something kept them together. Something kept them telling others not just about his teachings, not just about what he'd done...they told people about him.

So it wasn't just that they believed Jesus' *mission* was right...it was that they believed it was *true* that *Jesus* was raised from the dead. The focus of all that they said and did is his Him. And taking it still a step further: It wasn't just that they *believed* Jesus' resurrection to be true; they claimed that they *knew* it to be true. **They knew that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was either true, or false.** They were there. They watched him die on that cross, they saw his body get carried off...they huddled together in fear and uncertainty in the day and a half or so after...and yet they all claimed – and proclaimed! – to have then seen him alive and that's the news that they spread.

Lately, as you know, there's been a lot of talk about “fake news.” A lot of people will stand by fake news to a degree...usually because it's *benefitting* them somehow. But if this fake news means hardship and even their own death...and they knew it was fake news, don't you think they'd fess up? Acts 12:2 tells us that the apostle James died by the sword because of persecution for his faith. Acts also records the death of Stephen who, although not one of the 12 Disciples, was in the next circle of disciples and one of the first people appointed as a deacon, and his death was because of his faith in Jesus. Historical tradition tells us that the rest died because of their testimony about

Jesus. They refused to change what they said, because they knew the importance of getting the word out that the Resurrection of Jesus was real. They had seen him.

It's been said that "you only live once." **But really, you only die once; you actually get the chance to live every single day.** Each day you wake up is another chance to live. I get it that each day is connected together in one life...but still, each day is another chance to live. Jackie Robinson's life is a testament to that. Every day he lived with purpose because of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And every single day the first Christians preached the truth of the resurrection, they lived it out, they suffered for it, they dedicated their lives to it. And it very quickly grew to include more and more people...and we are here today because that truth has been proclaimed throughout the world to all the generations. And all of that is because those first Christians claimed that they actually knew that Jesus was raised from the dead.

So the Good News of Easter is that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead! And it's not just good news...it's certainly not fake news...it's true news. And really: Doesn't truth matter? Doesn't the truth of something hold value for us?

It did for the Disciples...it did for the early church...it did for Jackie Robinson...and it does today, too. And the truth of Jesus Christ is that he was resurrected from the grave. It's why Jackie Robinson felt called to help break the color barrier in baseball, and help "God's kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We can do the same. If you want to live a life that touches others, that leaves the world a better place than when you came into it, that inspires others to love people, extend forgiveness, that helps earth look more like heaven, Jackie Robinson and his breaking of the color barrier in baseball is a great inspiration. But: **The real foundation and inspiration for a life well-lived is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who broke the death barrier.** No longer does death have the final say. The end is not the end. There is true, abundant and eternal life to be had through faith in Jesus Christ, and the resurrection tells us that not only is that right...but that it is true...and *that* is a cause worth

giving your life to. Let's Pray...Amen.