

Luke 22:24-38

Table Talk

Every civilization, every culture, has some definition of greatness. Each has its own way of defining what it means to be above the rest; to achieve a sense of superiority. In some cases, an individual takes it upon himself to claim being the greatest. One can think of Muhammad Ali's famous "I am the greatest" speech before his world title boxing match with Sonny Liston in 1964. Others have the claim to greatness placed upon them. Michael Jordan and Tom Brady are often referred to as the GOAT - the Greatest Of All Time.

Whether merited or not, the worldly definition of greatness has to do with superiority - of being better. It reflects raising oneself above others of the same vocation or whatever it is one is measuring. The one who is the greatest has a sense of value and place. They possess the right to look down on the others who have failed to achieve what they have achieved. They can hold up their heads and look with disdain and condescension on those who would dare to try to supplant them.

The Setting

As we pick up the story in Luke's gospel, we have come to the end of a long and very emotion-filled evening. Jesus had celebrated the Passover meal with His closest friends. They had all eaten their fill. The conversation had been rich. The fellowship had been sweet. Jesus had talked one last time about the most important things. He had washed their feet. He had prayed for them. He had established for them a new memorial - the importance of which they did not yet fully understand.

By now, Judas had left. Perhaps the other disciples had not noticed; perhaps they had noticed but made nothing of it. Jesus knew. Jesus knew why he had left, where he was going, and what would follow. Jesus had to have been deeply troubled. And not only because the cross awaited. He had loved Judas. He had washed *his* feet. He knew the eternal destiny that awaited him. A man He had spent three years investing in had turned his back and was bound for damnation. It must have broken Jesus' heart.

Jesus must have hidden His emotions well. Or perhaps the disciples were enjoying the evening too much to notice. Clearly they were oblivious to the moment, for Jesus' thoughts were interrupted by sounds of a quarrel.

Dissension Within

When did this argument begin? For how long had the disciples confused Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God with the expectations of earthly rewards? Before we judge them too harshly, we would do well to remember that these were mostly humble men. Perhaps Matthew as a former tax collector was well off. Maybe Peter and Andrew, who owned their own fishing business were doing well. But none of them was wealthy and it is quite likely that they were all simple men who had worked many long and hard hours for their livelihood. The prospect of ever doing anything else could not possibly have entered their minds until they met Jesus. They were ruled. They were ruled by Rome. They were ruled by the Jewish religious leaders.

But then they followed this rabbi who spoke of a coming kingdom. And they were not only to be participants in this kingdom, but to share overlordship. No wonder the idea of power and authority went straight to their heads.

“¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ²And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³and said, ‘truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (Matthew 18:1-5).

“³³They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, ‘what were you discussing on the way?’ ³⁴But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. ³⁵Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, ‘if anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ ³⁶Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷‘whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me” (Mark 9:33-37).

“⁴⁶An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, ⁴⁸and said to them, ‘whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great” (Luke 9:46-48).

Perhaps on this particular occasion the conflict had been rekindled at the beginning of the feast when there was discussion about the seating arrangements at the meal. Whatever the reason for reopening the topic, we cannot miss the irony of the imminent sacrificial death of Jesus juxtaposed with the disciples’ selfish bickering over place and honor.

Despite the fact that Jesus had recently explained the eschatology of the coming kingdom, emphasizing the fact that it was in the distant, not immediate, future, the disciples still quarrelled about place. They had understood only that there would be a kingdom, and that in this kingdom they would receive positions of authority. What they did not understand, despite the efforts of Jesus to teach them, was that there was much suffering (for both Him and them) to go through first.

When we reflect honestly, it is impossible to deny the power and influence of pride. We can all acknowledge how firmly pride is embedded in the human heart. Try as we might, we have all experienced at some point the difficulty of truly rejoicing in the success of others. If another receives some honor for an achievement we are uninterested in ourselves, or accomplishes something we are not trying to accomplish, we can easily be enthusiastic and delighted. But when others receive honors we think are due us, or achieve something which despite our own best efforts we cannot, we sulk and pout and find every excuse to explain it away, and refuse to acknowledge the fact that perhaps they are more deserving.

Despite the stress of the moment, and the fact that He had needed to deal with this same behavior before, Jesus responded generously. He did not allow the strain of the moment and the emotions of the evening to frustrate Him. But neither did He permit His disciples to think that their attitude was correct. Looking them in the eye, “He said to them, ‘the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors”’” (v. 25).

Jesus began His lesson by reminding His disciples of the world’s definition of authority. In the ancient world, people in authority, people with power, were often uninhibited in the use of that power. They took advantage of those under them. They indulged in the benefits of their office. They appropriated the entitlements to which they had access. But, in their arrogance, they still considered themselves to have the masses’ best interest at heart, and perhaps to convince themselves, as well as their subjects, they often put ‘benefactor,’ or its equivalent, on their coinage.

But the kingdom Jesus was establishing had a different understanding. As He reminded them, “it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant” (v. 26). That Jesus says “youngest” when we expect “the least” is not a mistake. It is perfectly in keeping with the culture. Old age was revered in the ancient world. It was seen as God’s blessing. The youngest was always least in honor. Jesus then gave a practical illustration. “For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (v. 27).

Jesus redefined greatness as not having someone wait upon you, but rather on being humble enough to serve others. ‘Others’ was the entire purpose of His Incarnation and crucifixion. He had not only taught this truth, but He had modeled it. As Jesus had said when this issue was raised before, “²⁶whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

And He had even modeled such humility that evening, not an hour or so before, “³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. ⁵Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:3-5).

Jesus defined greatness not by the worldly measures of power and authority. To be great in His kingdom was to be a servant. The kingdom of God upended the worldly standard. “²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last; and the last, first” (Matthew 19:29-30).

Can we become people who are willing to serve no matter how humble the task? As Paul put it when writing to the troublesome church in Corinth, “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls” (2 Corinthians 12:15). And again writing to the church in Philippi, “³do nothing from selfishness or

empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

But still Jesus praised them saying, “you are those who have stood by Me in My trials” (v. 28). After all, there had been times when the disciples had stayed loyal. Once, when “⁶⁶many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. ⁶⁷So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘you do not want to go away also, do you?’ ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God’” (John 6:66-69).

Yes, they were proud, and often lacked understanding. But all except Judas had stood the course thus far. Therefore, “²⁹just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you ³⁰that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (v. 29-30).

Jesus was referring to His future kingdom. Jesus had promised before they would rule with Him. After seeing the dejection of a rich young man who chose not to follow Jesus, “²⁷Peter said to Him, ‘behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?’ ²⁸And Jesus said to them, ‘truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’” (Matthew 19:27-28). At the end of history, these men will rule with Christ.

An Attack from Without

Jesus now turned from addressing the group as a whole to Peter specifically. He called him not ‘Peter’ the rock, but rather ‘Simon’ his given name. Perhaps, He wanted to remind him of his humanity. “³¹Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat” (v. 31); Though Jesus was speaking to Peter, the ‘you’ is plural. He was talking to Peter, but His words were for all the disciples to hear.

The repetition Jesus used indicated emphasis and emotion. Jesus acknowledged the perils of believers in spiritual warfare. Satan demanded, the word means to insist, that he be permitted to attack Peter and the other disciples. We must pause here to remind ourselves that Satan can do only what he is permitted by God to do. He is limited. He has parameters established for his activity.

Nevertheless, the devil is an enemy to be respected. Remember Eve, and Job. C. S. Lewis wrote that there were two errors to make regarding a believer's understanding of Satan. The first was to discount him as merely a cartoon character, unworthy of our attention. The second, equally dangerous, was to engage in an obsessive fascination with his every movement; to think that any time something does not go our way, it is Satan at work. Neither extreme is healthy. Satan is powerful; he is angelic. But he is not God.

The world can corrupt us, our sinful nature can be a burden, but it is Satan who attacks. Sifting is a violent process. It is vigorous. It requires shaking. But even this attack by Satan was a part of God’s sovereign plan.

It had been prophesied,

“Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd,
And against the man, My Associate,”
Declares the Lord of hosts.
Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered;
And I will turn My hand against the little ones” (Zechariah 13:7).

And Jesus would not leave them without resources. Indeed, He reminded them “³²I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail” (v. 32). Jesus prayed for His disciples. What an encouragement that was. What an encouragement that is. He prayed then. He prays now. He is our High Priest. We are sustained only because Christ prays for us.

“Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25)

“Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Romans 8:34).

His prayer was that His disciples would prevail, that is, endure. The prayer was for perseverance. He frequently rebuked them. They frequently deserved it. They were misunderstanding. They lacked faith (remember the tempest on the sea). But they persevered. And they persevered through the prayers of their Savior.

A Personal Challenge

Jesus then directed His gaze on Peter and said, “you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (v. 32). Jesus restores. He knows Peter will fail. He knows Peter will be restored.

But Peter, ever confident, wanted to assure Jesus that he, at least, would give Jesus no cause for worry. With complete honesty and yet, completely underestimating the challenge, Peter “said to Him, ‘Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!’” (v. 33). It is easy to see why Peter misjudged the situation. He assumed, wrongfully, that Jesus would be with him. Peter had seen Jesus overcome nature, demons, disease, and death. He would go anywhere with Him. At Jesus’ side, Peter had nothing to fear. (We will see an example of this next week when we look at the encounter in the garden of Gethsemane). What Peter failed to realize, was that he would be called upon to have great faith when Jesus was gone. And when Jesus was gone, Peter would prove very fearful indeed. Knowing this, Jesus tried to warn him. “Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me” (v. 34). The prediction was specific so as to embed the words in the mind of His disciple.

Peter would fail. But Peter would be restored. Later, Jesus specifically commissioned Peter to leadership.

¹⁵“So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘tend My lambs.’ ¹⁶He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘shepherd My

sheep.’ ¹⁷He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘do you love Me?’ And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘tend My sheep’” (John 21:15-17).

And Peter would preach daringly to the Jewish leaders who, only a weeks before, had crucified Jesus. He would eventually be imprisoned and executed for his faith. Through all of this, Peter continued to be a leader of the early church and to ‘strengthen’ his brothers.

The Hostility of the World

Jesus then returned to the group as a whole. They were about to leave for the garden. Within an hour or so Jesus would be in the hands of His enemies. These were His last words to His disciples in comfort and privacy. “³⁵He said to them, ‘when I sent you out without money belt and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you?’ They said, ‘no, nothing.’ ³⁶And He said to them, ‘but now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one’” (v. 35-36).

The beginning of this exhortation contains the same general words used when Jesus commissioned His disciples, and then later when He sent out the seventy, to preach and manifest miraculous works demonstrating the power of the coming kingdom of God. At that time, due to the generosity of others (through the work of the Holy Spirit) the disciples lacked nothing that they needed. Now that the coming of the kingdom seemed imminent, the disciples no doubt assumed that their power and authority would remain. So Jesus began “but now” to help them understand that the future would be very different from the past.

Jesus would be killed. The disciples would have to continue their ministry apart from His physical presence. Jesus understood this and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles it would present to His small band of followers. The disciples would need courage to face persecution. They would need initiative in a hostile world. Therefore again, He tried to warn them of the world they would face.

They would not be provided for, so they would need to care for themselves. People’s homes would be closed to the followers of an executed criminal. Word would spread that this rabbi had not proved to be the Messiah after all; that His kingdom had not come to pass but that He had simply been put to death like countless other failed zealots. The Romans still ruled Israel. All of His teaching and miracles (if indeed miracles they were, some must have wondered) were for naught. The disciples would have a very difficult time finding support among the masses in the near future.

A question does come up concerning the sword. Did Jesus really mean for His disciples to sell their belongings and arm themselves for battle? Clearly not. When Peter sought to defend Jesus in the garden a few hours later “Jesus said to him, ‘put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword’” (Matthew 26:52). So this was not a literal sword to which Jesus referred.

Some commentators suggest, then, that Jesus was referring instead to a personal knife for carving meat and performing various small tasks. This, too, seems unlikely, since they all probably already carried one. One can hardly imagine a fisherman without a small knife for cleaning fish and cutting rope. The best, in fact, the only sensible conclusion is that Jesus was speaking figuratively. He was emphasizing the courage the disciples would need.

And Jesus explained, “for I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, ‘and He was numbered with transgressors;’ for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment” (v. 37). The disciples could not miss the reference,

“Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

This was not about the fact that Jesus would be crucified between two criminals. It was an assertion of the substitutionary element of His death. Jesus paid the debt others (even we) had incurred.

Ever eager, the disciples took too literally Jesus’ words. “They said, ‘Lord, look, here are two swords.’ And He said to them, ‘it is enough’” (v. 38). Not that two swords would be enough, but rather meaning enough of that kind of talk. The disciples had misunderstood again. Perhaps smiling to Himself at their childish innocence, He suggested they take a walk in the night air and go pray.

Takeaways

We can take assurance from the fact that those who have been closest to Christ here will be closest to Him in eternity, but let us not argue for place. We cannot ever serve as perfectly as Christ, but we can all serve better than we do. Let us measure greatness in that way, but our ability to be humble and meek and willing to do whatever the Lord commands. Without complaint. Without discontent. Without looking about us to see what everyone else is doing.