

Greatness

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now in Luke chapter 22, page 882.

! Luke 22 from verse 24.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, that's Jesus, the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them and those in authority over them are called benefactors.

But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater?

One who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

[1 : 19] You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you as my father assigned to me a kingdom. That you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Heavenly Father, bring your ancient and powerful word into the present so that it can be delivered and heard with all the freshness of a new day, with all the immediacy of a friend's embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. I am among you as the one who serves. It is written into the heart of man to want to make our mark in life, to be significant, to aspire after recognition, some kind of greatness.

Isn't that one reason there's so much friction and disagreement among peoples and among nations, that one people group doesn't feel it's getting the recognition it deserves?

In the Hollywood blockbuster Troy, telling the story of the fall of that fabled city, the anti-hero Achilles triumphed over everybody else because he wanted to be remembered forever, and to go down in history as the greatest warrior of all time.

[2 : 45] Every human being is engaged in his or her own search for significance. It's a feature of the human condition, our relentless desire to be noticed and to aspire after some kind of greatness.

But what is true greatness? There's nothing wrong with aspiring after greatness as long as we define greatness in the right way.

And this is where the Christian gospel comes into its own. The natural human being views greatness as being at the top of the pile.

The message of Jesus Christ is that true greatness is being at the bottom of the pile. The natural human being views greatness as being served by others.

The message of Jesus Christ is that true greatness is serving others. And in these verses, Luke 22, 24 through 30, Jesus reinforces that principle.

[3 : 53] One wouldn't have thought he'd have needed to. He just instituted the first communion, where with bread and wine he demonstrates that how through his body and blood freely given in the cross, he will save all those who believe in him.

He will save them by being humiliated for them. He will exhibit true greatness by dying for them. But immediately after such a display, we read in verse 24, the disciples began to argue among themselves as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

What then is true greatness? Why does the Christian gospel allow us to pursue that greatness while everyone else is pursuing their own kind of fake greatness?

What allows us to serve others while everybody else is being served? In a self-serving world, how can we express this important Christian distinctive of being like Jesus in serving others?

So I want us to examine two themes from our passage. True greatness, verses 23 through 27, and true grace, from verses 28 through 30.

[5 : 08] The second is the answer to the first, or to be more precise, it is because we have freely received the grace of Christ in the gospel that we can faithfully serve others the way Christ has served us.

First of all then, true greatness. True greatness from verse 24 through 27. It would seem almost unbelievable, when it not written down in black and white, that at a traumatic time like this, the disciples of Jesus could argue among themselves as to which of them was the greatest.

It's so inappropriate. It's like a family member's arguing at a funeral, or like the groom making his wedding speech and referring to all his previous girlfriends. You want to put your head in your hands and pretend it's not happening.

It just goes to show that no matter how long the disciples have been with Jesus, and how much they love him, and they do, they still don't get it. They still think of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, that he'll sit on an earthly throne as the king of Israel and institute a new Jewish world empire.

They still think of greatness that way. And the question is, who will be his right-hand man? They're jockeying for positions in a fantasy kingdom while Jesus is readying himself to die on a cross to institute the real kingdom of God.

[6 : 39] The tragedy is that 2,000 years later, many Christians still think this way, that true greatness in the kingdom of God consists in getting to the top, being noticed, being regarded as significant, having power over others.

I want to be the most famous Christian in Glasgow. They want to sit on VIP seats. They would never lower themselves to taking out rubbish to the bin or cleaning the church toilets.

They don't want to listen. They want to be listened to. So I wonder what thoughts must have passed through Jesus' mind when he heard them arguing with each other.

It doesn't seem to be any anger or exasperation in his voice. So perhaps, given how much he loved them, he saw this as an opportunity to teach them something of primary importance about himself and the nature of Christian discipleship.

He says to them, the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them and those in authority over them are called benefactors. This is the way the world views greatness.

[7 : 48] The great ones of this world exercise lordship over others. They control others. They have authority over others. They get their way. What they say goes.

Their servants don't question them, but do what they say lest they face punishment. The kings of this world are at the top of the pile with everyone underneath them. They're on the top rung of the ladder.

They're the top dogs. They are this world's leaders, presidents, prime ministers, kings. When we think of the great ones of this world, where do our minds automatically take us?

When we think of the great ones of this world, where do our minds automatically take us? That little exercise will tell you in an instant what your default human setting is when it comes to what constitutes greatness.

It's a sobering reality check and shows us that we're not really all that different from the disciples. But we know Jesus is right.

[8 : 58] Those who were considered great in his day were at the top of the pile. Herod, the king of Judea. Pilate, the proconsul. Tiberius Caesar, emperor of Rome.

These men exercised lordship over others. I'd love to be called benefactors. Those who were generous to their people, even if they weren't. We see this version of leadership and greatness at every level of our society.

From business, to sport, from social clubs, to politics, to government. True greatness as being the top dog. But Jesus then says something that stops us in our tracks.

And if there's some words I want you to remember today, these are the ones. But not so with you. But not so with you. He could not have been more definite.

Whatever we think of the way the world considers greatness, that's not the way we as Christians are to think of it. Not so with you is a challenge to what it means to have authority and leadership in the church, for example.

[10 : 05] Bullying, coercive behavior, has no place in the church. I'd go as far as to say, I don't believe the world has an awful lot to teach us about leadership in the church.

All we need to learn is taught in the Bible. When I hear people talking about adopting leadership practices from business, I want to say to them, but not so with you.

That's not true greatness. Following the word and example of the Lord Jesus, that's true greatness. He then goes on to describe what true greatness is in the kingdom of God.

Let the greatest among you, verse 26, become as the youngest and the leader as one who serves. In the world of Jesus' day, to talk of someone as the youngest doesn't have anything to do with their age, but with their level of significance.

The youngest was the least important. So the David who became king in the Old Testament was the youngest of Jesse's sons. The least important.

[11 : 12] Is this not what Jesus had been teaching for years? The dependent child, the empty beggar, the repentant tax collector, the dependent widow.

These are the greatest in the kingdom of God. The greatest in the kingdom of God is the one who becomes the least significant. Significant. The leader who becomes the servant. We love stories about paupers who become princes.

About beggars who become kings. But in the gospel, the prince becomes a pauper and the king becomes a beggar. Can Jesus be any clearer? There is much talk about leadership in today's church, but precious little about servanthood in today's church.

We seem to have forgotten that the word minister means servant, not leader. Again, when I hear leadership being continually touted in church courts, I want to say, but not so with you.

Greatness in the kingdom of God is not top down, but bottom up. The greatest in the kingdom of God isn't the one who exercises lordship over others, but the one over whom lordship is exercised.

[12 : 28] Not the one who is served, but the one who serves. If we want to be great in the kingdom of God, aspire downwards into serving others with humility.

Let's ask the question of ourselves. In what ways am I practically serving others? Yes, even here in Kilroy Free Church. Or am I just content to be served by others?

Jesus then asks a question. Verse 27. For who is the greater? One who reclines at table or the one who serves?

The answer is, is it not the one who reclines at the table in the world of the day? Slaves serve those who reclined at the table.

Jesus ends the debate. But I am among you as one who serves. Without seeking any kind of recognition or reward, Jesus serves his disciples.

[13 : 31] He takes the place of the slave. Because this is true greatness in the kingdom of God. Service. The Christian who wants to be like Jesus needs to understand this.

To become Christ-like, is to become a servant who without seeking any kind of recognition or reward, takes the place of the slave. The Christ-like Christian renounces status and reputation.

And though those she serves don't understand, she takes the lowest place. She who is the daughter of God becomes a slave. It's not just practical expressions of service either.

For we know that we can fake having a servant-like attitude, like being Uriah Heep. It's having the mindset, attitude of a servant. Listen again to Jesus. I am among you as one who serves.

You know, thinking through this, I find this to be one of the most deeply profound statements in the whole Bible. God in the flesh, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the glory and praise of heaven is among us as one who serves.

[14 : 47] Does this not, in its very nature, reveal to us the heart of the God we serve and worship, the God whose first instinct is love, self-giving, and sacrifice?

The God who stoops down to us, lowering himself underneath our status, the God who empties himself and takes the form of a slave. Jesus says the most God-like thing and displays his divine nature as he says, I am among you as one who serves.

And so we see a Christian lowering herself. And we see her doing the most menial of tasks. And we say about her, see how Christ-like she is. See how God-like she is.

True godliness is expressed not in being served, but in serving. And we wonder then at the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ, who continues to be with us and among us as one who serves.

The greatest of all his acts of service was because of his great love for us to give himself on a Roman cross. The Christ who had been enthroned in the glory of heaven's praises was lifted up on a cross, humiliated and tortured to take the punishment our sins deserved.

[16 : 11] This was his greatest act of service, that he should love us and give himself for us. The slave on the central cross. He's the Lord of glory. And we're filled with awe and reverence and praise.

But then, and with this we close this section, there are some who say the way up is the way down. that the way to become great in the church is to play the servant.

We must first prove ourselves servants before we can rise to status and position in the church. That our service is some kind of probation before we're recognized and become truly great.

Listen to what one of my favorite commentators, the Anglican, Leon Morris, writes, this is, these are wonderful words. Jesus is not saying that if his followers wish to rise to great heights in the church, they must first prove themselves in a lowly place.

He's not saying that. He is saying that faithful service in a lowly place is itself true greatness. Listen again to that final sentence, the masterpiece.

[17 : 32] Faithful service in a lowly place is itself true greatness. The way up is the way down is totally false because for the Christian the way down is all it is.

Any thought of being promoted to a higher status and no longer having to serve but having people who serve us is a million miles away from the mindset of the Christ who continues to be among us as one who serves.

No one should ever say I'm too good, I'm too important to clean the toilets, spend time listening to a struggling Christian, put myself in the welcome motor, make cups of tea.

This is the essence of what it means to be like Christ and this is what it means to be truly great in the kingdom of God. Let me ask each of us the question as I challenge myself, in what ways are we showing our Christ likeness in this respect?

Are we serving others? In what ways are we doing this? It is to our considerable frustration that 20% of people in our church do 80% of the work.

[18 : 47] We need help. Can you at least be part of this answer? How can you be among us as one who serves? How can you be like Christ to us?

Can you become truly great by offering to help? Remembering those words of Leon Morris, wonderful words, faithful service in a lowly place is itself true greatness.

Please speak to me after the service if you feel challenged by this. True greatness. Well, secondly, and more briefly, true grace from verse 28 through 30.

True grace. They say that we live in a world where everyone's out for themselves. Now, this may or may not be true. We see countless acts of selflessness every day and often from the most unexpected people.

Nevertheless, how can we as Christians stop ourselves from trying to aspire upwards to status and reputation? How can we stop ourselves trying to get to the top of the ladder like everyone else is?

[19 : 55] How can we aspire to go downwards, to be like Christ, to give ourselves for others rather than forcing them to give themselves for us? Now, some, of course, falsely think that they can earn salvation by serving others.

They think that the more they serve, the more saved they are. that the God who sees their service for others is impressed and will reward them with eternal life.

They work their way to salvation by endlessly serving God and endlessly serving others. They don't realize there is nothing we can do to earn salvation.

Nothing. If there was, there would be no need for Jesus to have gone to the cross. Why did God send his son to the cruel death of the cross if there was another way that human beings could be saved?

Self-salvation is no motive for serving others. It spits on the cross. It leads not to salvation but condemnation. The real reason why we serve others and aspire to the lowest place is because of the supreme grace of God in Christ.

[21 : 12] in verses 28 through 30 Jesus assures his disciples that the father has assigned the kingdom to him and that his disciples will be there feasting at his table and ruling over the nations.

In other words Jesus says to them your heavenly future is already assured. Jesus has promised it to them as a function of him having been given the kingdom by his father.

they have nothing to prove because Jesus has done it all and has by his gift of grace assured them and promised them a place in his kingdom.

That is why we can serve others with a Christ like attitude and mindset because by the grace of the Christ who went to the cross for undeserving sinners like us our place in his kingdom is assured and promised.

we've got much to look forward the closer presence of Christ the privileges that Christ presently enjoys what a gift of grace that we selfish self-serving and sinful creatures should have a place secured for us in Christ's kingdom what a gift of grace that we hear Jesus' words in the first communion saying to us this is my body which is for you this is my blood which is for you the greatest act of grace is the self-giving of the son of God on the cross that gift which secures promises and assures our future in heaven by simple faith in him our salvation was secured by the service of another by Jesus self-emptying and taking the lowest place as one who is among us as one who serves it would be the height of contradiction if having been saved by the servant king we should now live as those who aspire to be served by others we have nothing to prove as Christians we have nothing to earn

[23 : 23] Christ died for us and by grace he assures us a place in the glory of heaven and now we live like him serving others in the way he served us giving ourselves for them that's how and why we aspire to the path downwards because even if we should get to the bottom rung of the ladder of human society we'll never get any deeper than Jesus went for us we love Psalm 40 we'll probably sing it tonight in Psalms and Sausages God drew me up from the pit of destruction out of the mighty bog where do we find this Christ but below us in the pit our hero Jesus Christ heaven's highest he became earth's lowest to set our feet upon a rock and to place a new song of praise to God in our mouths we never get closer to Christ than when we're serving others and we do so because Christ has served us first and by his service has promised us salvation and eternal life if we want to serve we begin at the cross the greatest act of service the universe will ever see and realize it was for us it was for us as Jesus said the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many so we follow

Jesus in his example of service even in this upper room as we learn from John's gospel Jesus showed his disciples the full extent of his love he took off his clothes and he wrapped a towel around his waist and he filled the basin with water and he washed his disciples feet forget it figuratively speaking whose feet can we wash today we cannot wash someone's feet unless we're willing to take the place of the slave unless we're willing to walk our Lord's footsteps after him you know the greatest acts of service often go unnoticed a hand on someone's shoulder an ear listening a prayer offered up for another Christian there are a thousand examples and I'm sure there would have been a bit of thought we could all come up with one or two of our own ways in which we could serve another

Christian and express the servant heart of Christ ultimately however this passage is not calling us to an example or even an expiation it's calling us to a person the Lord Jesus Christ I am among you as one who serves unless you let Jesus serve you by giving you his salvation free of charge through his death on the cross there is no other way to be saved I was reading on my Facebook feed this morning I don't often use Facebook but I was reading it this morning Alison Becker the goalkeeper from Liverpool he's come out and said look Christianity is not about rules it's all about a relationship with a person of Jesus Christ all about a relationship with a person Jesus Christ unless you let Jesus serve you by giving you his salvation free of charge through his death on the cross there is no other way to be saved as Jesus said while he was washing the disciples feet unless I wash your feet you shall have no part in me are you willing to be served by Jesus today with the perfect salvation you can't earn it it's not a reward for the good person you've been it's a gift of Christ received by faith today by his spirit Jesus is among us as one who serves offering us free of charge the gospel of Jesus Christ are you willing for him to serve you let's pray Lord our God the one to whom we pray and the one who created the universe the one who threw the stars into space the one who named them one by one how amazed and awestruck we are when we read these words of your son I am among you as one who serves father forgive us for our pride and our self-seeking for our laziness and our selfishness we pray Lord that you would help us today to be served by Jesus served with his salvation and eternal life and then to go forth in the example of Jesus to serve others our great in the name of our great servant king we ask these things in Jesus name Amen