

The self-absorbed disciples meet Jesus * Luke 22:24-27
March 28, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

There's a really interesting question at the heart of our passage today: what makes a person great? What makes a person important? What gives them value? Is it power, authority? Is it wealth and status? Is it a social media following and influence? What is it that makes a person truly great?

The disciples in Luke 22 want to be great; they've heard Jesus talk about the Kingdom of God and they immediately want to know who's going to be the most important in the Kingdom. They want power and privilege; they want status and prestige; they want to be better than everybody else and it leads to one of the most cringe-worthy moments in the Bible.

Join me in Luke 22 and we'll dig into this passage. Luke 22 describes for us the Last Supper, but then verse 24 – it's a little bit like this lady that was on Family Feud Canada in terms of cringe-worthiness. They were down to the last moment; \$10,000 was on the line and the host asked 'Name Popeye's favourite food.' And she hit the buzzer and yelled 'Chicken!'

That's Luke 22:24. It's the Last Supper – Jesus' disciples are gathered together for what He knows will be their last meal together. He has just laid out how He is about to suffer and die for them – and all the disciples can think about is who's the most important among them.

24 Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest (Luke 22:24 NIV).

They just don't get it. Three years with Jesus and they still don't understand. Jesus says 'I'm about to die for you' and the disciples immediately say 'who's the most important here?'

They are so focused on themselves that they don't really hear what Jesus is saying. They want to be great, but they've got their definition of greatness all wrong. So Jesus takes this opportunity to redefine it for them.

Look at verse 25 -

25 Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.

26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Jesus takes the world's definition of greatness and turns it on its head.

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those with authority use it to do what THEY want. They do public works projects, but they don’t care about the public; they just want their name on the building as ‘benefactor.’” This is ‘greatness’ according to the world. Greatness means doing what you want, when you want. Greatness means having people under you to do your will. Greatness means power and privilege and wealth that you use for your own benefit. That’s the world’s definition of greatness.

But Jesus says – not so with you.

True greatness does not mean being better than others; true greatness means benefitting others. True greatness is the willingness to serve.

Look at verse 26 – the greatest among you should be like the youngest, the one who rules like the one who serves, the one who sits at the table like the one who waits at the table.

Who would the world say is most important in each of these? The first in each pair, right? The greatest, the ruler, the guy who has his name on that table and whenever he pops in, he can expect top notch service from the wait staff; but Jesus says ‘no, true greatness is not being better than others; true greatness is benefitting others.’ True greatness is found in the willingness to serve.

I like how David Garland puts it – The disciples want titles; Jesus gives them towels (paraphrased). “Greatness is not determined by how many serve you, but how you serve others.”ⁱⁱ True greatness is found in the willingness to serve.

Now it’s one thing to say this, but another to live it because this *isn’t* the way of the world, is it? I mean, we certainly have an appreciation for those who serve others but the basic attitude of the world is ‘do what you gotta do to get ahead.’ ‘Get paid and get ahead.’ So it kind of begs the question – ‘why?’ ‘Why should we listen to Jesus and lay down our lives for the benefit of others?’

‘Well,’ Jesus would reply ‘that’s exactly what I did for you.’

Verse 26 – Jesus says ‘I am among you as the one who serves.’

He’s not calling us to do something He’s not already done. He’s not some hot-collared radio host pontificating about how you should live your life without actually living it Himself. He got down on His knees to serve. And that should motivate us to do the same.

Realistically speaking, Jesus should have been the one being served. He is God Incarnate, capable of giving sight to the blind and healing to the sick and yet here it was, serving the very people who ought to have served Him.

For whatever reason, Luke doesn't include the footwashing account in His Gospel, but we know from John that just before this, Jesus 'who was in very nature God,'ⁱⁱⁱ 'who had all power and authority in His hands'^{iv} took off His outer robes and did the work of a menial servant, washing the disciples' dirty, grimy, stinky feet. And what's more, He knew that the next day, He would lay down His life in the greatest act of service, taking our place on the Cross and restoring us to God. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

That's why He can define greatness as the willingness to serve. That's why He can point to the world's vision of greatness and say 'not so with you.' That's why He can call us to this radical lifestyle of service. He can do it because He's already done it.

True greatness is found in service, just like Jesus did. True greatness is found in Christlike service. In tying on the towel, in taking up the Cross and following Jesus in service to others.

I know this is going to be a short message, but the point is pretty clear. True greatness is found in people who see Jesus' servant heart and seek to seek others the very same way.

Great people serve others! Great people follow in Jesus' footsteps and use their wealth and privilege and strength in service to others.

And I'll tell you. It's a real privilege to serve a church whose unstated motto is not 'How can I benefit?' but 'How can I help?' I was once at a church where we had an eight week sermon series on servant-heartedness because nobody had one, but I think that there are a lot of servant-hearts here. This is truly a 'great' church in Jesus' sense of the word. Keep it up. Keep on laying down your privilege to serve for the benefit of others. Consider how you can apply this in your family and workplace and community. Resist the urge to compare yourself with others; be on guard against the desire to be more important than others. Keep walking in Jesus' footsteps because true greatness is found in Christ-like service. Great people serve others.

It's always fascinating to consider how people get the name 'the Great' tacked onto their name. Some people are called great because of what they've done: 'The Great One' scored a lot of goals; Alexander the Great conquered a lot of Kingdoms; Charles the Great – Charlemagne - united a lot of nations into what became Europe. Those are all great accomplishments.

But then you've got people who are called 'the Great' by the people they served. Pope Gregory I was called Gregory the Great by the thousands of people he fed on a daily basis. In 589 a flood destroyed the city's grain reserves; famine and plague came soon after that. Gregory threw himself into mobilizing the church to give food and relief to all who were in need. Contrary to most of the popes of his era, he used his power and privilege not for himself but for the benefit of others. Gregory knew that true greatness is found in Christ-like service.

How about you? Do you want to be great? Then follow Jesus and serve others.

ⁱ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/family-feud-chicken-popeye-dubois-manitoba-1.5422325>

ⁱⁱ David Garland, Luke, ZECNT, 867.

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 2:5.

^{iv} Paraphrase John 13:3.