

## The Highest Aspiration

Luke 22:24-27

January 27, 2025

Well, we return to Luke 22 in our study of the Gospel of Luke, and we're reading the final instructions of our Lord to his men, his twelve Apostles, before his death for sins. Our Lord, as we know, as he's been predicting and telling us all through this Gospel narrative, he will soon be betrayed into the hands of sinners.

He'll endure the false accusations of sinners in corrupt courts that he'll go through, and he'll be sentenced to a criminal's death. This man who never committed one sin, he'll be condemned as a criminal and to the death of shameful crucifixion. And it's in these final hours before the cross that Jesus wants to spend some private time with his men, his closest friends, and he wants to get them ready for what lies directly ahead.

Once again, let's start our time by reading. You can follow along as I start in Luke 22 and verse 14. "And when the hour had come, he reclined at the table, and the Apostles with him. And he said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I say to you, I shall never eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'

"And when he had taken a cup and given thanks, he said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves. For I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.' And when he had taken some bread and given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood.

"'But behold, the hand of the one betraying me is with me on the table. For indeed the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.' And

they began to argue among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing."

News of a betrayer in the midst of the twelve disciples came as a total shock. No one saw this coming except Jesus. No one of the disciples saw this coming, and no one would have identified Judas Iscariot as the source of this treachery. And so the shock led to the spirited discussion in verse 23, which became heated and then turned into contention in verse 24. And we'll keep reading from there.

"And there arose also a dispute among them, as to," which of them, "which one of them was regarded to be the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. And those who have authority over them are called "Benefactors." But not so with you. Rather, the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines? But I am among you as the one who serves.'"

We can understand, I think, in just simple reading of the text, how the discussion of verse 23 turned into the contention of verse 24, as each man is there wanting to make sure that he himself is not the betrayer.

And the question swings from who is perhaps the very worst among them to who is the very best among them. After all, the closer each man is to pole position, the front place among the disciples, the more distance he puts between himself and any suspicion of treachery, of betrayal. So Jesus responds to this with the correction in verses 25-26, and then calls them to consider his own example in verse 27, and his own example being the highest aspiration in the pursuit of greatness in life.

What Jesus does here in this section, verses 24-27, is what we're going to cover, and what he does here in teaching his men is once again to subvert their wrong expectations. He does a lot of subverting of wrong expectations in his ministry. In fact, that seems to be a lot of what his ministry is about, to correct false understandings, to subvert wrong expectations.

But in this sense, it, it may not be in the way that we're tempted to think. It may seem like the problem among the disciples, and what needs to be corrected and subverted, is the fact that they're talking about greatness at all, as if greatness in their conversation and thinking about greatness is a flaw in their character. That's not the issue. The problem is that their measure of greatness is flawed. Their value system, their estimation of greatness, they've got that all wrong. And that is what Jesus endeavors to subvert. It's not the pursuit of greatness; it's what greatness really is, so that they know what it is that they ought to aspire to.

And what we're going to discover by the end of the hour is yet another demonstration of divine wisdom, how God has ordered the economy of his kingdom. The highest aspiration as Jesus' disciples is to follow after the greatest among us.

The greatest, that spot is already taken by the author and perfecter of faith, the one who performed the greatest service of all in sealing our redemption. But in following after him, we discover that the pursuit of greatness in life may be joined by

any Christian of any means, any Christian of any station, of any gifting, any ability, any capability. And so we find that this section of teaching is as encouraging as it is challenging and convicting and penetrating. So buckle up.

I've mentioned the outline points already if you perceived them, but let me make them explicit. Here they are again: the contention, verse 24; the correction in verses 25-26; and finally, the aspiration in verse 27. The contention, the correction, and the aspiration.

First, the contention. As we said, we understand and we can perceive how it is that the discussion of verse 23 turned into some contention in verse 24, "There arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest."

That word, dispute, *philoneikia*, *philos* is the word for love, or *philia* for the word love, plus *nikos*, *nikos* meaning victory. So if you were to translate this literally based on its principal parts, it's a love of winning. That's what the

contention is. It's contending. It's loving victory, loving winning. As A. T. Robertson says, "It's to be fond of strife, and eagerness to contend." So this is the most fitting word to portray what is going on here. In an argument about the greatest, there can be only one winner, so they're going to contend for it.

And that, I think, is the reason why Luke has juxtaposed verse 23 and verse 24 in such a way as to show us this point: that anxiety over the identity of the betrayer, each man wanting to make sure not only that he's not the betrayer, but that also he wants to make sure others know he's not the betrayer, and so their anxiety and fear over that issue exposed hearts of pride as they are jockeying, each of them, for first position.

It's not the first time that these men argued about who would be the greatest. Way back before they even started the trek to Jerusalem, back in Luke Chapter 9 in verses 46-48, this issue came up then as well, almost in similar language, almost with a similar corrective.

Parallels in the other two synoptic Gospel accounts, you've got Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 9:33-37. And by putting all these together, we get the whole picture painted for us. We understand by looking at those different texts that God granted three of the twelve, remember those, Peter, James, and John, three of them, the privilege of witnessing the Transfiguration.

They ascended the mount with Christ and saw him transfigured in glory before them. This is kingdom glory. Moses and Elijah appear, and they're speaking with Jesus about his ascension, about his departure from Jerusalem. The literal word, there, is his exodus.

They're seeing things that angels long to look into. They're seeing things that none of the other disciples got to experience. And when they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them to keep quiet about it, not to talk about until after his ascension.

But it wasn't long after that experience that they started to argue as to who was the greatest. They didn't need to talk



about the Transfiguration. But hey, three of them knew. We saw what you didn't. There's a privilege that we have that you don't have. And they kind of kept their cards close to the chest out of obedience to Christ. But it's fueling pride within them.

All three synoptic writers then show the contention that rises up immediately after Jesus, just right after this section of his Transfiguration, he comes down and right before this, he predicts his betrayal.

They think kingdom glory's coming and he says betrayal's coming. It's going to get darker before it gets lighter. There's going to be suffering before there's glory. And so he says, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men."

Matthew says the disciples were grieved, deeply grieved, about Jesus telling them this, and, and yet Mark and Luke tell us that none of the disciples understood what he was talking about. They were afraid to ask him about it. It just didn't make sense. It didn't fit their paradigm. It didn't fit their expectations.

Mark tells us this in Mark 9:33-34: "They came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he began to question them, "Hey, what were you discussing on the way?" This is right after, right after he predicts his betrayal, his suffering, his death.

He came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he began to question, "Hey, what were you discussing on the way?" He knew. He just needed to draw it out. "They kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest."

Matthew chapter 18, recording this account, adds this, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Well, then, who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And Jesus called a child to himself and set the child before them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you're converted and become like children, you'll never enter the," kingdom of God or the "kingdom of heaven.'"

Is he saying, have the innocence of a child and you can get into heaven? No. That's a common misinterpretation. Children, as any parent will tell you, are not innocent. They are glorious little gifts from God. The fruit of the womb is a reward. We're so grateful for our children, but we do understand very quickly and they don't have to be taught to sin. They just start doing that. It's not the innocence of a child Jesus is talking about, that he's commending and setting before them and saying, be as innocent as a child to get into heaven. No.

Children in those days didn't warrant any respect, regard. Nobody thought anything of them. In fact, with such a high infant mortality rate, it was very common for children to die before they were of any use to anybody.

It's not really maybe our, precious moments, type of a vision that we have of our own children because we tend to be very sentimental. And why wouldn't we? They're very, very dear to us, our children.

They're dear to them, too. But it took some time before children counted in society. They had to grow up, they had to become productive, they had to become useful. And even as young people, they had no wisdom, they had no experience, they weren't listened to, regarded like many regard young people today. Very different view of the young in this day.

So Jesus says, unless you're converted, you have nothing to commend you. You have nothing before God to make you acceptable, to make you commended to God. You are a zero on the counter. You have no weight in the scale, you've got nothing to add, you've got nothing to offer, you've got no righteousness of your own. In fact, anything that you have is actually a negative on the scale. So unless you're converted and become like children who have nothing, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Whoever, therefore, will humble himself as this child, he's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Totally, radically flipped their idea of what greatness, evaluation of greatness, is. You'd think that would do the trick, that they would be cured of pride, embarrassed as, about

having their selfish ambition exposed before Jesus Christ and before one another, but especially before Jesus Christ, who is the greatest and the humblest of men.

But it comes up again. It comes up in Matthew 20:20-23, Mark 10:35-40, both of these recording the same account of James and John approaching Jesus to seek places of honor in his kingdom, to be seated at his side, James on his right hand as the oldest, John on his left.

Matthew tells, tells us that the brothers were pretty shrewd about this whole ploy to gain favor and honor and, and grab those two, only two seats right next to Christ, and they're going to get them for themselves.

So Matthew tells us the brothers got their mom involved. She went and made the appeal. Now, Jesus, you know my boys. Matthew 20:24, Mark 10:41, virtually the same, exact language of response from the other ten disciples. "They heard what James and John asked Jesus, and they became indignant with them." It's a verb that means annoyed or vexed or even distressed.

There's an element of distress and anxiety that leads to their, their anger and their indignation. What distressed them? What made them mad? It's not because they're indignant, the brothers' presumption and pride, as if they're so humble, and they can't believe that some of their comrades here in their number have been exposed in their pride.

That's not the issue. They're upset that James and John got to Jesus first, got a head start and had taken the two highest places of honor for themselves. Aargg, they beat us to it! That's the issue.

Again, wanting to be a great disciple, that's not really the problem here. The problem is the pride of wanting honor for oneself and using worldly standards of valuation and of estimation, seeking glory, but not seeking the work, not, not enduring and embracing the suffering that comes before the glory.

And Jesus told the brothers on this occasion, he said, You, "you don't know what you're asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Remember what they said? Yeah, we're able. He's like, you got no idea what I'm about to drink. So he responds to their ignorant display of prideful self-assurance and says, "Yeah, you'll drink a cup of suffering, too." But he understands at that point, and they have no idea.

So this is not a new argument among the disciples. This is not a new problem amongst the disciples. They've been disagreeing and debating about who's the greatest for a long time on the, must have made, you know, parents driving a long road trip. And the kid is always like, when are we going to get there? When are we going to get there? I got to go to the bathroom. When are we going to get there? I'm hungry. When are we going to get there? When are we going to? Right? It makes for a wearying journey.

Children, you want to bless your parents? Whenever you come to a rest stop, go to the bathroom, number 1. Number 2, just count it as an opportunity to fast and if they give you food,

it's okay to break the fast. And number 3, you get there when you get there!

But for Jesus, the greatest among them, walking in humility and always serving all the time, walking down the road as they make their way on those dusty, long journeys to Jerusalem, and he's always hearing behind him, I'm the greatest. But he's the Lord and he's not like me, so he's not thinking that.

Jesus had been predicting his betrayal, and he'd been predicting it repeatedly. And now we come to the very night of his betrayal. And Jesus even said, "One of you will betray me, one of you who eats with me." He said, "He who dipped his hand with me in the bowl, that's the one."

And then in our text, verse 21, "Behold, the hand of the one betraying me is with me on the table." It's happening right in front of them. And not only do they fail to recognize that what Jesus predicted is happening right before their eyes, but that same spirit of pride rises up again. I mean, talk about failing to read the room and not discerning the moment.



It's fun to make fun of them, but I, when I think about it, if I put myself around that table, I'm going to do the same thing. I'm made it the same stuff. I'm going to be just as dull, just as thick, just as prideful.

J. C. Ryle says, "This was the last quiet time that they would spend with their master before his death, and they argued over which of them was the greatest. Such is the human heart: always weak, always deceitful, always ready, even at the best of times, to turn and engage in evil." End quote.

So if we pause for a moment and ask the question: What does this teach us? What, what should we learn from just this single verse? First, we should learn that pride is the very stubbornest of sins, isn't it? It's deeply penetrating, pride is, and so thoroughly saturating that it blinds us while telling us that we see clearly.

Pride strokes our egos, soothes us with flattering words, making us wise in our own eyes. Pride encourages us, but falsely, assuring us that there just isn't any other way to see this. I've got this, right? Stuart Scott used to say, "It's not a matter of if we have pride, but how much pride do we have, and where is it?" So true. So first, pride is the stubbornest of sins. Another thing we learn is that pride is the cause of so much strife and sin and jealousy and envy and argument and disunity. Pride and unbelief, they're two sides of the same filthy coin. Pride and unbelief are the twin sins at the root of every single other sin.

Again, J.C. Ryle said it well. He said, "There's something very instructive in this fact. Of all the sins, there is none which we need to watch and pray about more than pride. No sin is so spacious, that is unfounded and deceitful. It can wear the clothes of humility itself. It can lurk in the hearts of the ignorant, the ungifted and the poor as well as in the minds of the great, the learned, and the rich." End quote.

So beloved, watch out. Watch out if you think pride is not in you, and you fancy yourself to be quite far from pride and exceedingly humble. You're just self-deceived. Again, Ryle, "Ambition, self-esteem, self-deceit lie deep at the bottom of all people's hearts. Not some. Not most. All people's hearts, and often in the hearts of those who least suspect it. Countless people imagine themselves to be humble, but cannot bear to see an equal honored or favored more than themselves. Few heartily rejoice in a neighbor being promoted over their own heads. The amount of envy and jealousy in the world is glaring proof of the prevalence of pride." End quote.

The disciples' error provides a warning for us, doesn't it? It's a cautionary tale, that we must be on our guard at all times against this insidious and blinding sin of pride. We think highly of ourselves, and we look down on others. If we'll heed the warning, if we'll watch, be watchful and on the lookout, and not surprised when we see deep-seated pride; in fact, if we encourage others to tell us where there are signs of it in us, and then not get angry with them when they tell us, well, then, I think we're ready for the correction Jesus is about to give his men.

Second point, the correction. Look again at the text in Luke 22:25, "And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are called "Benefactors." But not so with you. Rather, the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.'"

Jesus is identifying secular rulers, here, as, the kings of the Gentiles or the kings of the nations, as it could be translated, the, the most familiar of whom to these disciples were the ones that lived around them. So the Herodian dynasty, Pontius Pilate, the governor, who represented the kind of governance that characterized the Roman Empire.

And two characteristics that Jesus cites, here, of secular rule: The kings lord it over their subjects, and they want to be known as Benefactors. So they lord it over their subjects, and they wanted to be known as benefactors. And the first characteristic of rulers that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, Jesus highlights, here, the social reality that there

is a vast, unpassable gulf between the ruler and the ruled, between the lord and his subjects.

The verb *kyrieuom*, translated, lorded over, it can also be translated, be master over or just simply, to rule or to exercise dominion. This is a verb that in its base sense, it emphasizes that there is a social distance between the ruler and those whom he rules.

So they don't mix. They don't fraternize. They don't socialize, consort, associate. They live, rulers live apart from their subjects. They breathe rarefied air. They live lavish life, lifestyles of luxury. Their homes are on the *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. That that used to be a show; I don't think it is anymore. But think about this, though: It's the rich and famous and luxury, all this is funded by tax money. That's starting to become more familiar, isn't it?

Joel Green is correct to point out, though, that Jesus, quote, "calls no special attention to singularly wicked kings, which he could have, but he doesn't call attention to singularly

wicked kings or to persons who are particularly abusive in their exercise of authority. He seems to have in mind, instead, the normal routine of kings exercising their rule," and for, "and those for whom the use of authority is itself a means for gaining status, honor." End quote.

So they lord it over their subjects. There's a distance between the ruler and the ruled. Not like Jesus, who mixed with his men, who slept on the ground next to them, ate the same food around the same campfire that they ate. Jesus had no special privileges. He didn't call for any special honor to himself. He didn't draw attention to himself and say, hey, I get the best seat. I, you're carrying my mattress, and you're carrying my tent and, and you guys sleep over there, and I'll sleep. He never did that. He was always with them as among them. That's how a leader is in Christ's church, in his kingdom.

But in the world, there's distance, there's no mixing, there's no consorting, there's no associating. Brings us to a second characteristic of rulers. "Those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'" And what he's calling attention

to, here, is the way that men handle authority in this world, the manner in which they exercise power. Many are using power and authority for personal gain, and they do so in a way that they're perceived by others and by their subjects as gracious, as generous, as, as benefactors.

It's God who's given them strength, whether physical or intellectual strength. It's God who gave them opportunity to develop gifts, talents, privileges that they've received. And yet many kings, rulers, and those who exercise authority, they believe they are their own cause. But it's God who gives strength, power, intellect, and opportunity for the good of others. He gives education for the good of others. He gives experience for the good of others, wisdom for the good of others, to serve others.

But many who rule want to get the credit for their governance. Many who rule want to get credit for the protection that they provide. I won you that war. I cut those taxes. I did this program. I did that program. They want to be seen as the source of the good of all humanity, as benefactors.

The form of the verb, here, to, to be called benefactors, the verb is *kaleo*, meaning, to call or to name. It's form, here, can be either be translated as the middle or passive voice. In the passive voice, it's as it's translated: to be called Benefactors.

But in the middle voice, which I think is more appropriate, here, it's, to call themselves Benefactors. It's to claim the title Benefactor. That's the idea. They want to be known as Benefactors. So they call themselves that way. They present themselves that way, is the idea.

The word benefactor, the Latin is *bene facere*, to do good, and it carries the idea from the Greek word, which is *euergetes*: *eu*, which is good or well, and then *ergon*, which is work: good work, to do good. Good works, it could be translated. So the word *euergetes* came to be used as a title of honor that was attached to a ruler: Emperor, Caesar, whatever his name is, the Beneficent, the *euergetes*.



It was a title of honor and respect and authority, and for the most outstanding of public leaders who wanted to be known, not just recorded in the annals of history, but known in their own day as well. They want to be known as public servants.

Yes, I know I'm laying down and drinking wine and eating wonderful food and living in luxury, but I need all this to keep my brain cool because I'm serving you. I'm, I'm doing you good. And that's why I need to live in this palace and protect it and away from all the *hoi polloi*, the common people. I can't let their ideas infect my pure thinking. I need to be here, separated from you.

The Romans had several titles that reminded people of the benefits of rulers, provided the people: *soter*, meaning savior. That's what Caesar was known as, the savior. Reminded everyone that rulers were a source of public safety and security. *Pater patria*, literally, father of the fatherland. It's an honorific title. You know, really the idea is: You're generated from me. I'm the source of all your life and breath and benefit and goodness. I'm the father of the fatherland. It's an honorific

title granted by the Roman Senate to prominent men. So like with the Roman statesman, Caelus, the philosopher's statesman Cicero, numerous emperors were called this.

It's common among ancient kings, as it is in our own day, right? Rulers, whether monarchs or prime ministers, whether presidents, senators, governors, they want to be known as benefactors. Even tyrants want to be known as benefactors, and they take that title for themselves. Leon Morris said, "People of the world like to get credit for what they've done." We see this at times with our own politicians. Every two to four years they tell us all how lucky we are to have them, how much they've done for us, how we can't live without them, and how we must give them our vote.

Politicians want the people who elected them to see the good job they're doing, and there's some good reason for that. I'm not trying to condemn all of that, but there are some who want us to consider them as the source of goodness, blessing and benefit. And we can all be tempted to, to think like that, can't we? We, we can all be tempted to want the credit. We can all be

tempted and if you examine your life, you'll see how petty it can be. You want the credit for a good idea. You throw something into a conversation and someone else says, yeah, I already saw that on the Internet. You say, well, no, but I saw it before you, you know. Okay, are you the source of that idea? No.

We all want to be acknowledged. We all want to be seen as the source of goodness, benefit, blessing, conversation, ideas, whatever it is. It's Harry Truman who said, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit." He's a Democrat saying that. We're a long way from that. And I'm not talking about the Democrats; I'm talking about the Republicans, too.

There was a system of benefaction in Jesus' day that favored the wealthy and kept the majority in relative poverty. The wealthy could avoid paying taxes by contributing, I put that in air quotes, contributing their own time and money, serving their own cities and towns. They gave of their time and gave of their wealth and appeared beneficent. But on a closer inspection, they were really contributing according to their own

whims. They gave when it suited them, where it suited them, and in the amounts that it suited them, and it was all really to further their own interests. So really, it wasn't true generosity, though it appeared that way. It was investment. They were setting themselves up. They were padding the nest of someone who could then come scratch their back later.

Similar practices are in our own day, as wealthy corporations and wealthy individuals donate massive sums of money, appearing to be generous; but on closer inspection, you see they're giving to causes that further their own interests. They're maintaining an advantageous status quo, or they are disrupting the status quo for the sake of creating advantage for themselves and creating gaining profit. That's what money buys you: influence. It assures you that you're going to keep the money stream flowing for the future.

Now, again, to be abundantly clear about what Jesus is saying or not saying, here, he is not drawing attention to particular bad examples of rulers or the wealthy as benefactors. He does not even intend, as some commentators say, he does not

intend, here, to expose, confront, and subvert a system of benefaction, as corrupt as it may have been. Jesus is not to be portrayed, as many commentators will try to do, especially these days, he does not come as a social revolutionary. He's not coming for a social revolution.

He came for a far more radical cause. He came to confront men in their sins and call for conversion. He came for the sake of, of men's forgiveness, for the regeneration and salvation of men. Those who are radically converted and regenerated by the Spirit, those for whom their sins are atoned, they're known by a radical righteousness. When I say radical, I don't mean crazy. I mean radical, meaning deep, foundational, pivotal, paradigm-shifting righteousness that grows from the inside to the outside. The evidence of true conversion is total life transformation.

And if that's so, who among the converted, but the leadership, the religious leadership, ought to demonstrate a transformed life. They're the ones who have to set an example for all. This is why Jesus says at the beginning of verse 26,

and he uses pretty strong language here, "but not so with you," or a better translation, "but you yourselves, not this way." There's not even a verb there. "You yourselves, not this way," "not thusly."

Stark contrast between church leaders and any other leader. Do not take your model for leadership from online influencers, from spec war guys who come back from 20 years at war and write books about leadership. Don't take your example from that. Don't take your example, I hope you're not taking your example, from politicians. Don't take your example from the world, from business leaders, CEOs, influencers, influential techs, tech giants or whatever. Don't take your model for leadership from them. Take it from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I, I, I, I can't believe how many times, and it's because of the, pler, proliferation of this kind of leadership stuff all over the Internet, but I say this all the time. I repeat myself all the time. And I'll keep repeating myself because I want everyone to look to the leadership example in Jesus Christ and him alone. And I'm not just talking about Christians. I want



Christians to understand the leadership example in Jesus Christ alone, but I want the world to see it too.

His leadership is radically subversive. It, it changes your entire paradigm of how you think about life and godliness and righteousness and salvation. It sets expectations for what your conversion should produce. Leadership among Christ's Apostles, this is such an important lesson for them at this pivotal time. They are the choice stones that Christ himself chose to set the foundation for his church.

And the pattern that he sets for them for their leadership is marked by humility, not by pride, and by serving, not by being served. He said to them, verse 25, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are called "Benefactors." But not so among you. Rather, the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like the servant.'"

Again, notice Jesus does not correct these men for aspiring to greatness. He, he doesn't say, you guys are always talking

about who will be the greatest. You're so carnal. You're so off-base. He doesn't swat them down for pursuing greatness. Instead, he adjusts their aim. He makes two aim adjustments, course corrections for them, and the first correction is to their attitude. The second correction is about what they actually do, how they live, their pattern of behavior.

First, he says, “The one aspiring to be the greatest among the Apostles, he must become like the youngest.” To be young, as I said, in the first century, meant to be someone of no reputation, routinely set aside and ignored, marginalized, pushed to the edge. He says, think of yourself that way. You don't belong in the middle of the conversation. Don't assert great things for yourself. Don't think of yourself that way. He's describing here an attitude of humility. It's the opposite of self-promotion. It's the opposite of drawing attention to one's own status, and a demand for deference and respect and honor. It's a posture, here, of modesty, of self-effacement, of meekness.



As the original leaders of the Christian Church, the Apostles are to set the example for the church, which means we're all to follow the example and the pattern that they set, whether Christ assigns to us positions and roles of leadership or not. Every single one of us is to follow this pattern.

Jesus does acknowledge that there are leaders in the church, as he says in verse 26. He chose them to be leaders for the church. It's not a problem that there's leaders in the church. It's not some radical egalitarian idea that, hey, we're all leaders and we're all leading and everybody speaks, and he gets a chance, and he gets a chance, and she gets a chance, and... No, that's not the way we lead.

There are those who are acknowledged as leaders and set apart as leaders. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear. We're to honor and esteem leaders. We're to make sure they're qualified, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, 1 Peter 5, Acts 20. We're to, we're to make sure they're qualified, they really do have the character and the competency for the job and the gifting that Christ gave them, that he's really called them into this

position. But we're to honor and esteem true leaders. But it is totally unfitting for Christian leaders to seek honor for themselves, to demand respect, to seek esteem, to want deference from other people.

And I'm just telling you, beloved, there is far too much of the wrong kind of leadership in the evangelical church today. And I'm not talking about, you know, the, the left side of the evangelical world. I'm talking about our circles and our corner of evangelicalism. I'm talking about doctrinally sound doctrines of grace, Reformed, 1689. There's far too much pride in men who want to put themselves forward and seek great things for themselves and the deference of other people. You might just wrap it up in the bundle that says celebrity culture.

How unlike the models of religious leadership that the Apostles grew up observing is what Jesus describes, here. Totally unlike that. The bad examples put before the Apostles all their lives, not just of secular leadership, but religious leadership, the Pharisees, chief priests, the scribes, they're all of a piece.

You may remember this from, if I can get there, Matthew 23, Matthew 23, in verse 6. Jesus is talking about the scribes and the Pharisees, who seat themselves in the chair of Moses. They take great things for themselves. They do all their deeds to be noticed by men, and it says in verse 6 that "they love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues. They like respectful greetings in the marketplaces, to be called Rabbi by men. Don't be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you're all brothers. Don't call anyone father on earth; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Don't be called Instructors; for One is your Instructor, that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

There are some who take that too far and fail to see the spirit of that admonition. Jesus isn't saying anybody in the church shouldn't be called a teacher or pastor or instructor. That's not the idea. It's the spirit that's behind it. Are you seeking the title and the honor and the respect for yourself? Are you seeking great things? Jesus said, That's, that's what the Pharisees do. Woe be to them.

That whole section sounds very familiar, as Jesus has taught these lessons on numerous occasions, and sadly, he had to teach on numerous occasions because of the stubbornness of pride in his disciples. That always warranted you one more lesson on this issue of pride and humility. And then, also, bad leadership is so common. It's everywhere. And so there are a plethora of illustrations abounding around them to say, don't be like that. Second point in verse 26, that a leader aspiring to be the greatest among the Apostles must become like the servant. As I said, the first part, there, addresses the attitude of leaders and disciples in Christ's church. The second part addresses what they do.

Whether we lead or follow, God is the one who gives gifts of strength and power and intellect for us to serve one another, serving those who are weaker, who are powerless, who may be less intelligent than we are, less accomplished, less exposed. Our gifts and talents and wealth and time is not for ourselves. He gives us enough to provide for ourselves and take care of our responsibilities, take care of our families. Yes, but really all

these gifts, opportunities, wealth, responsibilities, all this stuff is to serve others. It's to build other people up.

There are those who like to come and sit and consume, not just in the world, but in the church, too, those who take, take, take. Those who expect others to serve them, to cater to their needs, to their desires; those who come just sitting, listening to sermons and filling their ears with good things, but have no intention on doing anything about it. In economic terms, we'd call these consumers. They're like leeches on the skin, like parasites in the stomach, sucking the life and the health away. That state of affairs is worse than unhelpful. It's far more insidious than unproductive.

Self-centered consumers who don't serve other people, they're like cancer cells, aren't they? They use the body's nutrients not for strength to serve the rest of the body, but to feed a malignancy, to produce other mutant cells, and, and they reproduce until there's a dangerous mass that requires radical treatments like invasive surgery or poisonous chemotherapy.

# GRACE CHURCH



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True Christian maturity, true greatness in discipleship, is to use one's abilities, and strengths, and talents, and resources, and time, and energy to serve other people. Frederick Godet writes this, he says, "In the new society which Jesus is instituting, he who has most is not to make his superiority felt in any other way than by the superabundance of his services toward the weakest and the most destitute." End quote.

Ask yourself, Christian brother, sister, are you superabundant in your services toward your brothers and sisters? When we serve others, we are to serve Christians in the body of Christ as the first priority. We're, functioning members of the same body are our first priority of service. We don't run out to the world and go do stuff for them. We start with the church, and then we serve others outside the faith. Paul put it this way, Galatians 6:10, "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially," most particularly, most essentially, most, first priority, "to those who are of the household of faith."

In other words, the unbelieving are not to be neglected. For we were once unbelieving too, and we're thankful for the, for the charity and the kindness and the Gospel that we received from Christians. They're not to be neglected, but it's fellow Christians who have the priority of service. Make sure you serve one another, love one another.

Alfred Plummer got fancy in his commentary, used a French saying to describe this. For the French, it's just language. For us, it's fancy. *Noblesse oblige* is the word; nobility obliges. Nobility obliges. It's a corrective saying in French to say that true nobility is not from heredity, land, titles, but in seeing oneself as being obligated to others. That's where true nobility lies. Paul puts it this way in Romans 13:8, "Owe no man anything but to love one another." We're to put ourselves in each other's debt, in that sense.

This is true greatness, striving to grow in the kind of Christian nobility that uses one's wealth and possessions, one's freedom, one's strength and intellect, time, talents, and treasure, to use those gifts from God to serve one another, to

fulfill responsibilities to others; in fact, backing up a step, to find responsibilities and to take those responsibilities on ourselves and then go and fulfill them in the good for other people. This, as Plummer says, is *noblesse oblige*, which our Lord calls true greatness. He should know, right? After all, who in all humanity is greater than Jesus? Who had more power and strength and wisdom and knowledge than he, and yet, who served us more than he did?

This brings us to a third and final point. Number 3, the aspiration. The aspiration. I realize that there may be some timid soul out there, or others who may be lazy and disobedient people who yawn and say, Greatness? I'm not aiming for greatness. I'm saved by grace. I'm in. Some people are feigning humility when they say things like that. Other people's, other people are just ignorant, and they don't really know any better. But some people feign humility and they say things like, I'm happy just to be the outhouse cleaner in the kingdom. I'm not much. As if aspiring to greatness is somehow way too far above them, as if living a mediocre Christian life is commendable in some way. Wow, look how humble he is. He just doesn't do anything.



As we've seen, not only does our Lord refuse to correct his men for talking about greatness, he's encouraging it, here. He's encouraging such conversation by giving them direction and instruction on true greatness. To refuse to aspire to greatness and discipleship, as we're going to see in this point, is to refuse to aspire after Christ. It's to set aside all blessing and joy. It's to set aside any joy of take, of, of obligating oneself under his authority to excel for his name's sake. It's the idea of close enough is good enough. It's like horseshoes and hand grenades. Close enough is good enough. Okay, fine, if you're blowing stuff up.

But we're not blowing stuff up here. We're building. We're building. And as any builder and architect knows, close enough is not good enough. Close enough, you don't pass, ic, inspection. Close enough means you don't, you don't come in under budget, on time. Close enough is not okay. We follow the pattern and the blueprint in the Scripture, and we aspire for greatness and for excellence, for his sake, for his glory, and for one another.

I'd like to say that's why we do conferences around here. I like to gather everybody together and do something great and excellent and cool and cause some, everybody to rejoice in the truth that we put forward. And we love to serve it together. We love to do things for our community, for other churches, for other Christians. We want to be productive in that way and pour it out. Why? Because he poured it out to us first.

Aspiring to greatness is pursuing Christ. Luke 22:27, "'For who is greater? The one who reclines at the table,'" that is, the guest, "'or the one who serves?'" that is, the waiter. The question, here, is rhetorical because the answer is obvious. "Is it not the one who reclines at the table?" Jesus says. As everyone knows, in a social setting, the occasion of dining out, when there's a guest and there's one who serves the guest, it's the guest who's counted the greater and the servant the lesser. So then Jesus says, "But I am among you." And it's the strongest emphasis here in the Greek, *ego eimi*, that pattern: I myself am among you as the one who serves.

This illustration of guests and waiters or, serv, servers is so apropos here because he uses the verb *diakoneo* three times already. *Diakoneo*, the word from which we get deacon, it's a verb that literally meant waiting on tables. It came to have a, a referred to servant-work of all kinds. At the very least, *diakoneo* is to serve tables, wait on tables, wait on guests, wait on great people. The leader is the one who serves, verse 26, *diakoneo*. The one who serves, *diakoneo*, is never valued among others as the one who is greatest, verse 27.

And yet Jesus says, I am the greatest. He's inferring, and "I'm among you as the one who," *diakoneo*, "the one who serves." Quite literally, I'm waiting on this table. He demonstrated that, didn't he, waiting on that table that very night by washing his disciples' feet while they were reclining at the table to eat the meal that he provided. So ironic isn't it, that they argued about greatness just after the greatest among them, after he served them, acting like a slave.

Such a common repeated theme in the Gospels, as Jesus said on an earlier occasion, Matthew 20:26, "'Whoever wishes to

become great among you shall be your servant. Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'” This theme is just glowing in the subtext, here, as Jesus often taught his men in clear, pointed contradiction to what they had seen in other leaders. The Messiah King, he comes to serve. He comes to serve them at the most profound level. He meets their deepest needs, starting with forgiveness of sin.

Service, then, in no way diminished his nobility or stature, but actually, at the end of the day, it served to elevate it to the highest point, didn't it? Remember the text that was our theme over this past Christmas as we meditated on the *Carmen Christi* from the Apostle Paul? He writes this, “Have this way of thinking in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although existing in the form of God, didn't require equality with God a thing to be grasped or held onto,” or, or clutched onto, “but he emptied himself. He poured himself into the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. Being found appearances as a man, he humbled himself by becoming

obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross." There is no greater service that he could do.

"Therefore," watch this, "God also highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, and of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The one who is continually, eternally existing in the form of God in his divine nature, by his attitude and his actions in the incarnation, it's this Jesus who reveals to us, who shows us, who interprets to us what the glory of God the Father is, who he is, what he is like.

Our God gives, as we just read in Psalm 104, right, and Psalm 103. But our God gives unceasingly night and day, providing for the creatures of the night, providing for the creatures of the day, causing water to flow throughout his earth to irrigate our fields so that we can eat food. He's always giving, caring for his creatures, sending his Son and his Spirit to serve his elect. And when God sent the Son, it's the Father

who willed that he should act in such a way as to demonstrate true greatness in an attitude of true humility, take the action of a servant. So when we see Jesus Christ, we are seeing God in the flesh. We're seeing what God's like. We're seeing one who is continually giving to the world, caring for the world, serving the world.

God, who created heaven and earth, he did not create out of any sense of need of his own. He had no deficiency to be fulfilled. God is a *se*, self-sufficient. He has no lack. He has no want. He has no desire. He didn't create all this because he needed people to love him. He didn't need us to boost up his own glory. He wasn't lonely.

God is Trinity. He's perfectly content, perfectly blessed in his essence, perfectly satisfied, unchangeably blissful in his intra-Trinitarian fellowship of the three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. So the perfectly contented and blessed one shows his greatness in giving and creating and making and loving and pouring out all the time, day and night.

He sent his Son to serve and to serve us at the point of our deepest need. We need our sins to be forgiven. We need to receive from God a righteousness that is not our own, but a righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ. And Jesus serves that need.

So to encourage you to seek greatness, not a greatness that's got the wrong valuation, seeking honor and status and money and wealth and fame and influence and all the things that the world aspires after, but the highest aspiration of seeking and following and obeying the Lord Jesus Christ, to encourage you to do that, let me give you several closing thoughts, here.

First, Jesus puts true greatness within reach of every single believer, from the greatest to the least. No matter what wealth, strength of body or mind, social status, condition, situation, circumstance, all of us, each and every one of us, have equal opportunity to live a truly great life. Second, Jesus calls us to the higher aspiration to follow him and learn the secret of giving, learn the secret of serving, live the secret of sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others.

Paul said this to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:35, "In everything," Paul says, "I showed you," you Ephesian elders, "I showed you that by working hard in this manner, you must help the weak. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

You know, that's a statement right there from Jesus, a saying of Christ that's not found in any of the Gospels. Paul received that by a special revelation; and that revelation, we see, is a summary of Jesus' entire life and ministry. He is the most blessed one, and it is more blessed to give than to receive. And that's what he did. He continued, he poured out, gave, gave, gave.

Third, when we live to serve others, we follow our Lord and Savior, who reveals God to all; and when we follow him, we become partakers of the divine nature. By living to serve, we're children of our Father in heaven, who, though perfectly content, gives and serves. The Father has no need. And beloved, you and I truly in him have no need. We have no need. We're invincible.



We're indestructible. We walk with, we should walk with an air of invincibility, not because we're proud, but because we know our God has appointed the time of our birth and the time of our death and every moment in between, all to accomplish his ends for his glory. We're not going to die a moment too soon or a moment too late.

In his hands we have no lack. We have no need, we have no want. This is Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount, Luke chapter 12 as well, as he just says, "'Fear not, little children, you're of more value than many sparrows.'" The Father's provided for everything for you. So the God who has no need, gives, and gives, and gives.

We, like him as his children, who really have no need in him, give and give and give. And so we represent our Father in heaven. We become partakers of the divine nature. As children of our Father in heaven, we give and serve just like he does, and we manifest his likeness. We manifest his character, we manifest his ways. We live a life that's so different that the world looks and says, what, what, what gives? What explains you?

Fourth, those who live to serve mortify pride. You have to mortify pride. You have to tear the sins of jealousy out by the roots. Any jealousy, any envy, has no place in our life. Those who live to serve abide in contentment, not envying other people. We're content in our own ways. The lines for us have always fallen in pleasant places because our God is with us. We rejoice in the privilege to follow God's ways. We're satisfied in his goodness. We learn from Christ in this. We walk in the Spirit.

It is possible, dear Christian, and it's entirely within your reach and mine, to live with nothing troubling the soul and nothing hindering the pursuit of our greatest ambition and our highest aspiration to learn the secret of true greatness. Again, I'll close with a little bit of an extended quote from J. C. Ryle, who summed this up so well. He says, "The hero in Christ's army is not the man who has rank and title and dignity and chariots and horsemen and fifty men to run before him.

"It is the man who is not concerned about himself, but about other people. It is the man who is kind to everyone, tender to everyone, thoughtful toward everyone, ever helpful and sympathetic. It is the man who spends his time binding up the broken-hearted, befriending the friendless, comforting the sorrowful, and enlightening the ignorant. This is the truly great man in God's sight. The world may ridicule his efforts and deny the sincerity of his motives, but while the world is sneering, God is pleased. This is the man who's walking most closely in the steps of Christ."

May the Lord help us individually as Christians, but also collectively as Grace Church, to chase after this highest aspiration for true greatness in his kingdom, for his glory, and for Christ's sake and honor. Amen? Let's bow.

Our Father, we pray that you would make it so in us that we would live not content with mediocre Christian lives, but differently. To some you give greater trials than others, other, you give some more health challenges to some than others, more financial challenges to some than others. Not all of us have

equal resource. Not all of us have equal time, but with what you have given us, and you've given to every single one of us something, and if we look close enough, we'll see that you've given abundantly. You've given many things.

We pray that we would not look around and compare and contrast, but instead that we would look up to the greatest example and our highest aspiration, which is to be like Jesus Christ. We pray that you would help us to accept our, our state, and our condition in a godly way, be content in what you have given, be grateful for everything that you've given. But then not rest, but let us pursue and work that we would render a faithful and excellent service to you.

There are some who are homebound because of illness and can't get out much, and we just pray that they would exercise love on behalf of one another by praying fervently for this church and for unbelievers that they know who need Christ. We pray for their families. We pray for our governments and pray for the state, of the condition of our, of our country and our, our region and our town.

On the other end, Lord, there are those who are well-supplied, who have much means and great capabilities and abilities. We pray that you would help them to see, first of all, to seek responsibility, to take hold of it, to be qualified for it, competent to the task, and that you would use them to build, to grow, to edify, to strengthen, to encourage. And Father, let us, as Jesus said, "Let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." Let us be a loving people, following after the Lord Jesus Christ and embracing this joyful duty of service. It's in his name we pray. Amen.