



## FOR WHO IS GREATER, THE ONE WHO IS AT THE TABLE OR THE ONE WHO SERVES?

~ LUKE 22:24-27 ~

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A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 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. 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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Two weeks ago, 19 firefighters lost their lives battling a blazing wildfire up in the Prescott area. Last Tuesday, a memorial service was held for those 19 young men. The memorial service concisely expressed what many if not all people were thinking. These were 19 men who died in the line of duty, they died serving their country. Firefighters, along with police officers and the armed service men and women do receive recognition for their service, but for those who die in the line of duty, their legacies are immortalized – we would say those firefighters were great.

It seems like the death of someone brings out evaluations of how great a person was. You hear this kind of talk at funerals all the time. Where might you fall on the greatness spectrum? Do you consider yourself a great person? Talks about greatness do precede death, comparisons are made all the time. Today, in our gospel for this morning, we hear how the disciples were making comparisons of how great they were. So what makes a great person? HOW GREAT ARE YOU?

1. As great as a king?
2. As great as a servant?

(1)

The question that we consider this morning in our series *Jesus is asking* is this: “**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?**” This question is a very interesting one, because Jesus answers it for them. “Who is greater, the master or the servant? It’s the master, right?” And that certainly is the way of the world. Greatness is calculated in how much stuff you have, what authority you have, how many people love you, how many chores you can avoid.

The latter was one of those things the disciples were arguing about on this night. They were arguing about who of them was considered the greatest. Why were they arguing about this you ask?

They gathered for a meal with Jesus. But this was no ordinary meal, they were celebrating the Passover meal with him, and not just any Passover but the last Passover, the last meal Jesus would eat before he would be crucified. The Passover was an annual meal celebrated by the Jews to remember God's guiding hand in leading them out of Egypt. It was a special meal, and as such their feet needed to be washed beforehand.

To us the matter of feet washing before a meal isn't so common, but we also do not recline when we eat. I can imagine it would be very distasteful to smell some stinky feet a few feet from where you're eating. So foot washing was important. Unfortunately, that seemed to be the only thing that was missing from this meal, someone to wash the feet. This is the logical insertion of the disciples arguing about greatness. Each of them thought they were too good to wash another's feet.

How sad that scene would have been. A little earlier, Jesus had said he was eagerly looking forward to sharing this meal with his disciples. But all the disciples were eager to do was argue about who was greatest. So Jesus asks them what greatness looks like. What does greatness look like to the world? **"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors."** Kings and other rulers would show their power by the authority they wielded, the cities they built, the nations they conquered. To show this greatness they would plaster their faces over the coinage of the day. This is what Jesus is talking about when they called themselves "benefactors." For many rulers who did this it was a hollow and worthless title.

You can see that nowadays too. You have people that are famous for the wonderful things they have done – the sporting achievements, humanitarian activities, contributions to science. But you also have famous people who have done nothing at all. I can't even keep up with all of the pseudo-celebrities. Few of us could ever hope to achieve the greatness of the stars, and some people don't even want to. But there are many things that we would consider great that "ordinary" people can do.

Just think of some of the things that you are proud of. You are proud of the car or TV you saved up for. You're proud of the promotion you earned, you're proud of your kids, you're proud to be a citizen of the USA. Surely that can't be what Jesus is talking about right? It's not wrong to be proud of your kids, your job, your stuff. You are the only one who can answer that question, because you can read your heart. Why are you proud of all that stuff? It really comes down to the first commandment vs. your ego. The first commandment is, "You shall have no other Gods." Can your ego sometimes rise to the place of God in your own heart? This was how the benefactors of Jesus' day viewed themselves.

HOW GREAT ARE YOU? Are you as great as a king? It's true, we don't have the same governmental system as they had, but I think we all get the idea. We have this picture in our mind of what it takes to be great – climbing the ladder at work, getting straight A's in school, honing your craft, being a best friend. And this greatness comes with certain perks, perks of being able to choose what we want and don't want to do. A VP of a company (usually) does not want to do the menial task of emptying the garbage each day. An honor-roll student does not want to go back to rudimentary math of 2+2 or three letter spelling exercises, a star basketball player does not want to practice free throws. A best friend is too good to wash their friend's feet.

Greatness in the world is all about getting as high as you can get and being able to look down on others. But even the world recognizes the value of service. Even the world elevates on a pedestal those who serve. Many high school and college students strive to get so many hours of community service for their résumés. People volunteer time at homeless shelters, community events, a big brother/sister program. Donating to a non-profit charity is a way you can reduce your tax liability. The world looks to these things as other ways you can elevate your greatness.

The church is certainly not exempt from this kind of elevation either. Christians have been one-upping each other in the name of Christ since the time of...well...the disciples. It's easy to judge our Christianity on the basis of how orthodox we are. It's easy to judge our Christianity on the basis of how often we come to church, how many times we've read our Bible, how much we've given to the church. I am not saying any of these are wrong, or that we should stop caring about the Bible or church or giving. I want you to examine your reasons for doing this. Are you doing these things so you can look good for other people? Are you doing these things so you can look good before God? Are you doing these things to make up for other things you aren't doing? Do you look for greatness in service?

I think it's one thing to be able to *serve* people with the gifts that we have been given, but a completely different thing to be a *servant* to someone. We glamorize serving, but we don't really glamorize the servant. Take the popular new British show on PBS *Downton Abby*. It is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the different class structure. The two main classes were the aristocrats and the common people. The commoners were on a completely different class than the noblemen and women. They would be their servants. This is brought out very clearly at the dinner table. The aristocrats would sit down at the dinner table and be served by their servants. The servants, after the meal was completed, would eat their own meal in a separate servants' quarters.

There may be something a little bit fulfilling by doing a service, but there was nothing glamorous about a servant's life. This is why Jesus' question may have confused his disciples, it may be why it confuses us. **"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?"** We would agree with Jesus, right? But then he goes on to say, **"But I am among you as one who serves."** Not only did Jesus just wash their feet, taking on the servant's role, to do the task none of his disciples were willing to do, but Jesus spent his entire life being a servant to other people. He was a servant to mankind with his life and eventual death.

But why did Jesus do this? Did he do it as an example to his disciples, to put them to shame that since none of them were willing to wash each other's feet Jesus had to do it? Was he doing it to show how to run his church? No! He did it only and especially for them. But not just them, for the whole world. Philippians 2 captures what Jesus' life was all about: **"Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a *servant*, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"**

This is not to make us feel guilt ridden. It was not done as something of a loan that we have to pay back somehow. It was done by Christ for us. Philippians 2 continues on: **"Therefore God exalted him to**

**the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples? He told them not to look for greatness in the way that the world looks at it. He said, **"The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."** Jesus, by the act of washing the disciples feet, had humbled himself to do the lowest service for them. This fact, however, in no way changed the actual condition of things, namely, that he was the greatest among them. His action, in fact, established his position as their superior. His greatness as a servant showed his greatness as a king.

This is what Jesus is calling all Christians to do, not just to serve others, but to be servants. Our greatness in the kingdom of God is not determined in the length of time we have been a Christian, it's not determined by offerings. It's not even determined by how much "good stuff" we do for others or how much we are praised for it. Our greatness is determined by having the attitude of a servant, for no reason other than because Christ says.

HOW GREAT ARE YOU? It is certainly good and right that we praise the actions of others like those 19 firefighters who died two weeks ago. But I think they would be the first to tell you that they were only doing their job. They didn't do it for the adoration. And that is how a Christian ought to approach greatness. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is a paradox. The greatest is not one who is ruling, but the one who is a servant. For it was our servant-king who gave everything up for us, so that we might mean everything to God. Amen!