

Part 24: How to be Great

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As we've been working through the gospel of Luke we've seen and talked a lot about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Discipleship, more than anything else is a life of following. It is an active life of walking with, being influenced by, and learning from someone.

But what we are going to see in our text this morning is a challenge that still haunts our hearts and our own understanding of discipleship today. The challenge is this: While discipleship is a life of following, are we truly following Jesus, or are we asking Jesus to follow us?

The danger of this is subtle. Few of us would be so bold as to say that Jesus follows us, after all he is Jesus and we are not. But how many times, if we soberly assess our walk with him, are we asking Jesus to follow our dreams, fit into our plans, and meet our expectations?

It's only human to plan out for ourselves our own paths to personal fulfillment and satisfaction. In fact it's a remnant of the image of God inside each and every one of us that longs for this sort of greatness. But because of this many of us unfortunately end up affirming and enjoying only half of the life of discipleship.

There is an immense privilege, as we will see today, in walking with Jesus. Right now, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, your King is with you in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus not only walks with us, but he also walks before us. If Jesus merely walks with us then we do get to decide what greatness and personal fulfillment looks like for ourselves, and every now and then we get to look in the seat next to us and make sure Jesus isn't too upset about where we are going.

But if Jesus walks before us, if God himself has already set out the path of true satisfaction then our purpose has been defined for us. We walk not only with Jesus, but behind him. We follow him.

In a trade, in business, athletics and the arts we know the privilege of finding a good mentor, a good discipler, a good teacher. We know that often the path to personal greatness and satisfaction is defined by these rare encounters with someone who cares for our own development. Today Jesus is going to tell us what it looks like to be great as we walk with him.

What we are going to see today is this: **The path to personal fulfillment is the way of gospel wisdom.** In other words we are not only answering the question of how to be great, but how to be greatly satisfied. Jesus is going to lay out for us two ways in which we might find all of that. First we **Recognize the Privileges of the Gospel** and secondly we **Walk in the Purpose of the Gospel**.

Our passage today is tied immediately to the scene we read last week. John the Baptist had previously been working his way through the Judean wilderness proclaiming the good news of the gospel which was to come in Jesus Christ. He spoke of God's long awaited prophecies being fulfilled, that poor would be made rich, crooked paths made straight, lame men would walk, dead would be raised and captives would be set free.

But while Jesus began to fulfill many of these prophecies, John himself sat in prison and began to wonder if those prophecies were any good for him. Would Jesus notice him, would Jesus set him free, was Jesus really the messiah.

What Jonny showed us last week was that Jesus answered John with a firm, but encouraging reminder that the greatest portion of the work of Jesus was not that everything would be put right immediately, but that for those who believed the good news of salvation through Jesus, one day in the Kingdom of God, everything would be made new. In the meantime, keep the faith in Jesus.

Last week Jesus spoke to John the Baptist's disciples about his own ministry, and our passage today picks up as John's disciples leave and Jesus begins to speak to his own disciples about John's ministry.

Instead of casting doubt on John in light of his public questioning, Jesus is actually going to reinforce John and his message. This is going to be our first point today, this is where we learn to **Recognize the Privilege of the Gospel**.

Would you read with me **Luke 7:24-28**?

We see two distinct privileges in this passage. The first is that we see the ***Character of Jesus*** and in a moment we will see the content of the good news.

One of the biggest privileges of the gospel is that we are not only saved by the works of Jesus, but we are saved by the person of Jesus.

None of us are saved by our works. On our own we are sinful, we are unfaithful to God, and we know all of this because we have encountered those who don't know how to drive through a traffic circle.

But Jesus was perfectly obedient to his father, he lived a sinless life in a sinless world to die a sacrificial death as a substitutionary offering for all who though sinful, have placed their trust in Jesus.

But to be granted salvation by faith alone in Christ alone is not merely to have the benefit of Christ's work. When we come to faith, when we repent and turn to Jesus, all the benefits of redemption are applied to us. This means that turning to Jesus not only gets us the product of redemption, but it gets us the personal relationship with our redeemer.

Other religions might be able to present a god who can declare you righteous, but only the Christian God gives you his righteousness inside of his relationship. Why is this a privilege? Because look at what Jesus does for John here.

Here is John who once was at the top of his game, but on account of his message was thrown into prison, while many of his followers left him and followed Jesus, while many others wondered if his imprisonment invalidated his message, and on top of that John himself just publicly and perhaps humiliatingly so, doubted the very person who he professed to be the messiah of God.

Have you ever been second guessed? Whether from your boss who keeps wondering if you're going to be able to finish the project on time, or your spouse asking you with panic the moment she hears the garbage truck, "Did you remember to put the trash out?," we know the temptation to hot self-justification and frustration.

Put yourself in Jesus' shoes. Jesus knew that John was especially filled with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of announcing Jesus' own ministry. He knew that when John's own pregnant mother met with Mary while Mary was pregnant with Jesus, John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb. Jesus knew that when he himself was baptized by John that John heard the audible voice of the Father say, "This is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased."

If we were Jesus and John seemed to question publicly wouldn't we take it personally? Wouldn't we in a way want to show others that we are in fact so supreme and you shouldn't be as foolish as those who question us?

But what does Jesus do, he takes the time, to turn to the crowds and to defend John the Baptist.

Jesus doesn't need to do this. But Jesus, our savior king, the one who is a friend of sinners, cannot help and in fact lives to defend those who are his. Look at **Hebrews 7:22-25**.

We not only receive the work of Jesus which saves us, but we receive the relationship of Jesus which seeks to care for us. Salvation is where we get all of God, his work, his word and his person poured out and covenanted to us for our own benefit.

Here's the application of this. It's not uncommon for you to sin. It's not uncommon for you, like John, to doubt God's goodness in the moment. It's not uncommon for you to feel the brokenness of the world, the longing, groaning and straining of walking by faith and not by sight.

But in seeing the character of Jesus we should also find it common to go to Jesus with our sin, with our doubt and with our brokenness. If John's doubt stayed in the prison cell we might have had a different story, but John brought his fears and his weakness to Jesus and Jesus didn't mock him. He didn't belittle him. Jesus was firm and kingly with him, but as his brother he also sought to care for him because he loved him.

Do you see the privilege of the gospel in having not only the work of Christ, but the character of Christ turned towards you? To get the grace of Jesus is to also get the goodness of Jesus. To get the legal declaration of Jesus' righteousness is to also get the relational love of Jesus.

Jesus defends John here by saying this: What did you go to see? A reed shaken in the wind? Did people flock to John because he was a doubting reed shaken by the changing uncertainty of the wind? No!

Did you go to John to see some sort of royal herald? No! If you wanted royalty you went to the palace not the wilderness. So what did you go to see? A prophet, and that is what John was.

The joy of redemption is that the world might think one thing of you, but Jesus not only says something about you, but he continues to say it about you. He continues to defend all who are robed in his righteousness because he is as zealous for you as his is for his own righteousness. To defend the believer who comes to him is to defend the merit of his own work.

But Jesus advances the narrative a bit more with John than he does with us. This is where we see the second privilege of the gospel: ***The Content of the Good News***. Look back with me at **Luke 7:26-28**.

Jesus does three unique things in these three verses. First he affirms the unique role of John, he was the anointed of God. He was the final, most significant prophet there ever was because he was the final prophet before the messiah.

He makes this point by quoting from the prophet Malachi. Look at **Malachi 3:1**.

So not only does Jesus affirm that John the Baptist's message was the continued promise of God from the Old Testament, but Jesus does something that only Jesus can do and he tweaks the prophecy a bit.

Where Malachi says that God's prophet will prepare the way for God, Jesus says that God's prophet will prepare the way for "you" in the general sense.

Not only is the content of the good news the long awaited promise of God, but the message of the gospel, the prepared way of God, is also the prepared way for you. God's story is a re-invitation to your own story. Sin has not only knocked us not off God's path, but our own path. We cannot have a wrong view of God and a right view of self but here in the message of the gospel the right view of God is the path of individual purpose and redemption.

But thirdly, Jesus says something astounding. He says that anyone who walks in the Kingdom of God, even the least, will be greater than John. The power of John's message supercharges the life of those who believe it. The content of the gospel message is God's long promised plan of redemption which is for your own surpassing joy and greatness.

This message is for your surpassing joy!

How will those who are least in the kingdom be greater than John? Because John was only a messenger for the kingdom. Because John was the one who pointed to the door, those who walk through the door get something even better. Jesus knew, and here affirmed that John was going to die before he saw the completed work of Jesus on the cross.

But us, amidst the chaos of our world, we sit on the side of something greater than John. The newest Christian in this room who confesses faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ is greater than those who hoped in the promise yet to come.

John knew the power of the Holy Spirit which commissioned him for a specific task of being the messenger of Jesus. But for anyone in here who has faith this side of the cross, we not only have the Holy Spirit as a commission, but we have the Holy Spirit for the pure joy of communion. Yes, God wants to do something through the church but greater than that God simply wants to be with you as we walk the path of the church.

But the privilege of this greatness is not innate. It is for those who walk the way of the Kingdom. What does that mean? How do we walk this path? Jesus shows us next by teaching us to **Walk in the Purpose of the Gospel**. If the privilege of the gospel is so profound, what does it look like to wrap our lives around that.

Read with me **Luke 7:29-35**.

In a world which longed for purposeful living, Luke highlights for us those who found what they were looking for. Amidst the power brokers and influencers of the day, we find a group of no-name people and ill-thought of tax collectors who ended up declaring God just.

Now what does that mean? To declare God just? We read of God declaring us just and in fact the verb used here is simply the verbal form of the noun righteous. It's the same word Paul uses in Romans 8:33 when he says, "It is God who justifies."

So we obviously see here that there is a bit of a distinction. We aren't justifying God in a saving sense. God doesn't need us to declare him righteous as if we are a judge and we must render him a verdict of being in the right.

So what does it mean? In 1984, the blooming super-star Michael Jordan was shopping for a shoe-deal. On the market was the king of basketball shoes of the day: Converse. It was worn by legends like Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. There was also Michael Jordan's own personal desire of the shoe brand Adidas which was the trendy new arrival on the basketball scene.

But at the end of the day Jordan signed a deal with a little known shoe company who up until that point only made specialty track and wrestling shoes. That company was called Nike.

For the brand, the signing of Michael Jordan justified them. It vindicated them. It proved to the world that they did have value and meaning.

But where the super-star Michael Jordan brought justification to the no-name outlier of Nike, in our story today it is the no-name outliers of the crowds and the tax-collectors who justified the super-star long awaited promise of God.

This was the scandal of the gospel. Here we have superstars in the midst. We have Pharisees and legal experts. These are the guys whose job is to discern the way of the Lord. But they are not the ones who proved the true reality of God's path. It was the no-names who became great by declaring God's path just.

You see it is not the power of the masses that make the gospel true, but it is the truth of the gospel that converts the masses.

So how did these no-name outsiders become great? They followed John's way, they accepted his baptism – which was a baptism of repentance.

The gospel of Jesus was still yet to come in full when these guys responded to John. But they understood John's message that repentance was the way into the gospel of the Kingdom and they readily obeyed that message. They heard the message of sin, and they realized that sin best explained their reality. They said, "that's just. That's right." And if that's right, then I must repent.

This is contrasted with the legal experts and the Pharisees who rejected this reality.

They heard the message of sin, they heard the call for repentance and they refused to acknowledge what was really true. But did you notice what Luke tells us? Look back at **Luke 7:30**.

Did you notice what Luke said? He didn't say "They themselves rejected the purpose of God," but instead he says, "They rejected purpose of God for themselves." In other words, when they refused to acknowledge the reality about God they rejected the reality about themselves.

If the gospel of Jesus is true then when we encounter the message of sin and salvation through Jesus alone, we don't simply reject God's purpose. We reject God's purpose for ourselves. We leave on the table the true path of greatness and meaning.

We were made for a purpose. **Ephesians 2:10** and **Isaiah 43:6-7**. The message of the gospel is not a mere message of intellectual assent but of personal fulfillment and meaningful purpose, purpose in the glory of God.

I can ascent to the reality of quantum physics, but it doesn't change my purpose. But to realize the reality of the gospel changes everything. To respond to the kingdom by the gateway of repentance is to realize the problem is not what we know, but who we are. We are sinful. Our purposes, our goals, our dreams are all broken. We are the blind leading the blind.

But the path prepared and announced beforehand shows us the way forward is the way backwards. It comes back by means of repentance and then find the path of meaningful purpose by living now by greatness defined by Jesus and not by ourselves.

But we always wrestle with these expectations. We love grace. But our own pride hates that we might need grace. We want it, but we don't want to realize that we need it. Because of that our expectations of greatness are always off. Jesus illustrates this with a little parable: **Luke 7:31-35**.

Have you ever stumbled into a room where little kids are trying to convince others to play a game? If you have, you know the pain of what Jesus is describing here. On one hand you could have the authoritarian child calling everyone to play according to their rules while everyone else simply wants to play a different game. Or there's the one strong willed kid who is determined to not enjoy themselves regardless of what happens. Even when the group tries to cater to what that one kid might want to do, the child is never happy.

How fickle our hearts are when it comes to finding joy in the world. We are always and only frustrated in this venture just as Jesus' own generation was. Jesus illustrates this saying John came abstaining from the world and the Pharisees called him a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking with the world, and they called him a drunkard and a tax collector.

To listen to the voice of the world, or the fickle reasoning of your own heart is a zero sum game. No one wins. It never satisfies. We want greatness, we want purpose, but we never find relief. We either become the pretentious child who, out of arrogance refuses to play the game at all, or we feel so defeated because just as we feel we've done what it takes to win we find the rules always changing.

We even see this sort of confusion and exhaustion in the church. How many times have you tried to pursue greater levels of holiness, putting on Bible reading and prayer habits, maybe even giving up drinking or fast food only to have some people say: "You're being too legalistic!"?

But then we begin to attend dinners hosted by our neighbors, we go to the birthday party of the same sex couple across the street, we build relationships so that we can share Jesus with others, we meet people where they are only to have some say: "You're too worldly!"

So what is the way forward? Can we actually find our purpose? Yes!

There's a children's song my kids often listen to called: Bear Hunt. In it the adventurers find all these hurdles: woods, grass, rivers and mud. But the chorus always goes, "We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we're just going to have to go through it."

When we play by the world's rules for greatness we find losses and hurdles at every path. But the gospel message proclaimed by John, fulfilled in Jesus, and treasured by the church points to the way prepared for us. We try so hard to avoid this path. We look for every opportunity for satisfaction. But we can't go over it. We can't go under it. We must go through it.

What is that way? Repentance and obedience to Jesus. This is the path of greatness.

We need to stop listening to the message of the world's children and start being children of the message of wisdom. Jesus says at the end there is an alternative to the frustrations of the world's playground: **Luke 7:35.**

The children who respond rightly, those who like the crowds and the tax collectors respond to the message of God with repentance, justify the truth, the reality and the purpose of God.

Martin Luther opened his 95 Thesis by saying: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'repent,' he willed the entire life of the believer to be one of repentance."

Do you want purpose? Do you want joy? Do you want surpassing greatness? Repent and walk in the way of the gospel. It looks different and frustrating to the ways of the world but it is the right, just and real path.

Every era of church history has always faced a threat of sorts to the PR campaign of the gospel. We might wonder how the church is to endure, and how God might be seen as glorious. But here is the beautiful, simple and soul-stilling way: walk in the wisdom of the way of God.

Wrap your lives around the purpose of God by repenting and pursuing Jesus and we will be the greatest apologetic to the world. When our words and our works are shaped by the greatness of the Kingdom we find everything we are looking for.

Walking this way doesn't look glamorous. It might even look foolish, it might look scandalous and feel lowly - but this way really believes that the least is the greatest.

You see the beautiful wisdom of this text is that the critiques of the world are actually the deepest comfort to the children of wisdom. They would might laugh and say: "Jesus is a friend of sinners. A crutch for those who can't make it, a consolation prize to those who don't have what it takes."

But for those who see the message of the gospel in full there is nothing greater than saying and living in light of Jesus' friendship to the lowly-losers and sinful-saints saved by grace.